掟上今日子の保険証

西尾維新

講談社

掟上今日子の保険証

西尾維新
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Kodansha

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第一証

掟上今日子の不眠症

Ch 1: Kyoko Okitegami’s Insomnia

1

"P—Please, let me call a detective!"

I (Yakusuke Kakushidate) shouted for the first time in a while.

No, this "while" is strictly based on the observations of my personal internal clock; in terms of absolute time, the kind most of humanity uses, it's only been a week—ordinarily, you wouldn't call a detective every week, so the word "while" doesn't really fit at all. A kind person might assume I misspoke out of confusion, but that itself is the sort of misunderstanding I'm more familiar with daily than oxygen.

It feels less like breathing air, and more like breathing pure nitrogen.

I'm misunderstood almost every day.

Therefore, normally, I'd want to call a detective daily, maybe even twice a day, morning and afternoon—despite this, the fact that a whole seven days passed between the last time and this time was almost an abnormal situation in itself.

What had happened to me?

What could have happened for nothing to happen?

If I were to explain the rate by comparing it to the senses of a virtuous ordinary citizen, where seven days is equivalent to roughly seven years, perhaps you could understand my despair at that time—perhaps you could sympathize even a little. I had started to think maybe my tendency to be falsely accused had finally vanished, that perhaps God had forgiven me.

Alas, I had not been forgiven.

The burden of false accusation was heavy.

Incidentally (since it's not particularly important), let me first talk about the incident from a week ago: I had taken a job as a beachsaver, essentially a lifeguard at the seaside.

You could even say I'd "landed" it; it was a summer part-time job I'd struggled hard to get—I hadn't even considered that I should be protecting my own innocence before protecting the beach. My employer seemed suspicious of my constantly changing job history, but they valued my unnecessarily tall stature.

With this, I thought I could somehow survive the summer, sighing in relief like a cicada (if I were truly a cicada, I would have vibrated my chest and cried out), but in reality, I was fired immediately. Without even enough time to shed my skin.

Due to a false accusation, as usual. A familiar false accusation.

A false accusation more familiar than my own parents.

Being falsely accused on a beach might bring to mind marine-related incidents like poaching sharks, stealing pearls or coral reefs, or sinking a ship, but the charge written on the arrest warrant presented to me by the Coast Guard was the crime of releasing marine microplastics into the Pacific Ocean.

Heavy.

Plastic is light, but the crime is heavy.

Well, I suppose I couldn't say I was entirely innocent regarding that matter, but why did I have to bear the burden of a crime affecting all of humanity as a sole perpetrator—it's no wonder I shouted.

"Please let me call a detective!"

Like that.

Fortunately, the suspicion was cleared up quickly. So quickly I wanted some suntan oil.

Mind you, it was only natural since I called a detective who clears things up quickly—if I were to be greedy, I wish she could have solved the marine microplastic problem altogether, but unfortunately, solving such long-term crimes is outside 'her' specialty.

Because she forgets.

Because the swiftest, yet forgetful detective, forgets.

While she speedily solves any case within a day, she's utterly helpless—hands, feet, and grey matter included—when it comes to crimes that take more than a day to solve. Any culprit, any true culprit, any wicked crime, even the very karma of humanity, she completely forgets every time she sleeps—a white-haired master detective who absolutely adheres to confidentiality.

Phew.

What a predicament, I must say.

I mean no offense, but this time too, it seems I have no choice but to request 'her' presence for that very reason—she's by no means a cheap detective, but in this case, time is of the essence, not just a matter of a day, but every moment counts.

And yet, it's a case that absolutely must be solved—even if I weren't suspected of being the culprit.

Fortunately, even if I call her multiple times in a short period, she never shows any annoyance—because the Forgetful Detective, Kyoko Okitegami, forgets not only cases and crimes but even her clients.

2

"It's been a while. I am the detective, Kyoko Okitegami."

Huh?

I felt a strong sense of incongruity at Ms. Kyoko's words upon her arrival at the Raise residence, the scene of the crime—well, it's true that from my perspective it had been 'a while,' as I've explained at length, but from Ms. Kyoko's perspective, this reunion couldn't possibly be 'a while.'

It shouldn't even be 'Here we are again,' it should be 'Nice to meet you.'

Aside from her usual pure white hair and glasses, her fashion—wide tapered pants, easy-to-walk-in leather pumps, a red summer knit top, and a lace cardigan—was completely different from a week ago. Incidentally, at the beach, Ms. Kyoko had been dressed with much more thorough sun protection.

For the forgetful detective who uses her own skin as a memo pad—a mnemonic device—in case of emergencies, like being put to sleep by a culprit, sunburn is a major enemy.

Because words would remain on her skin.

That was an unexpected pitfall.

In that sense, her precautions had been quite effective, but if I had to say, today Ms. Kyoko actually looked rather pale—she almost seemed bluish, and though skillfully hidden with natural makeup, I could almost see dark circles under her eyes.

Or maybe, unbeknownst to me, this method of creating under-eye bags is the cutting edge of makeup—it's presumptuous for someone like me, who chooses clothes based on size, to evaluate the appearance of the fashionable Ms. Kyoko, who is said never to wear the same outfit twice.

Reconsidering this,

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Kyoko. I am Yakusuke Kakushidate, working here as a live-out babysitter—"

I started to introduce myself,

"Yes. I remember you,"

But Ms. Kyoko interrupted.

Swiftly.

"You were a beachsaver when we last met, but you've changed jobs, I see. However, since this is an emergency, I'll skip the business card exchange with you."

'That's fine by me, I have over a thousand business cards from the Okitegami Detective Agency anyway'—before I could proudly reply, Ms. Kyoko slipped off her pumps and put on the slippers I had prepared.

Not to brag, but they were slippers I prepared—it's quite pleasing, that the slippers I prepared met Ms. Kyoko's approval. And then Ms. Kyoko walked down the corridor without a sound—no, even wearing slippers, and even being a master detective, walking down a corridor completely silently is impossible.

That's precisely why.

This time, suspicion falls on me.

Putting that aside—

"U—Um, Ms. Kyoko."

"Yes?"

"Could it be that you haven't been sleeping?"

"Yes. For about a week."

Nodding, Ms. Kyoko turned around and rolled up the sleeve of her right arm, cardigan and all—revealing what is normally top secret, something not even known by those 'in the know,' known only by regulars like me, the aforementioned handwritten memorandum.

For example, on her left arm, it constantly says, 'I am Kyoko Okitegami. 25 years old. Director of the Okitegami Detective Agency. My memory resets every time I sleep.' Like that—but today, on her right arm, it was written thus:

In slightly messy handwriting.

'I am Kyoko Okitegami. Currently have insomnia (Erase this sentence if it looks unfamiliar).'

3

It was something I had wondered about before.

Saying this now sounds awfully like an afterthought, but what does Ms. Kyoko, who forgets all personal information—even her own—do when she falls ill? That's a seriously pressing question.

Well, of course, she probably manages somehow—in fact, she has been hospitalized for short periods due to injuries and such (she's even been shot). It's unlikely she hasn't received treatment from specialists regarding her memory loss condition in the first place—but, when she contracts a 'normal illness,' how on earth does she handle it?

Meaning, everyday ailments.

In this day and age, when paper health insurance cards are being abolished and fully replaced by electronic cards, if she catches a cold, what judgment does the director of the Okitegami Detective Agency, whose banner is the protection of personal information, make?

The master detective's daily life—a mystery of everyday life, so to speak.

"Oh dear, it's nothing serious, I'm alright. It's not bad enough to go to the hospital, please don't worry."

Ms. Kyoko says with a wide smile, trying to brush it off—from my perspective, her behavior seems like she's saying 'What are you talking about?'

Well, perhaps even if someone isn't particularly averse to hospitals, anyone behaves like this when they're unwell. When I have a cavity, even though it's clearer than any truth that I should go to the dentist quickly, sometimes my feet just won't take me there. I might ignore an unidentified shoulder pain, telling myself I'm still young—youth and pain are unrelated, and I'll likely say the same thing when I'm old. That maybe it'll be better tomorrow.

Master detectives are no exception.

However, of all things, insomnia.

Isn't that the worst illness a forgetful detective could get?

There's no 'maybe it'll be better tomorrow' for Ms. Kyoko; she only has today.

"Yes, just between us, since my memory doesn't reset even after solving a case, my work has completely stopped. As long as I call myself the Forgetful Detective, I can't start the next job without forgetting the previous assignment. I was about to starve to death at this rate."

If she couldn't sleep enough to starve, wouldn't she collapse before that—wait, would collapsing resolve the concern?

Because even a momentary loss of consciousness causes a reset.

It's like pulling the plug to reset...

Nevertheless, despite the gravity of the problem, Ms. Kyoko seemed somewhat high-spirited—after hearing her story, even her business-like smile feels like she's somehow elated by the critical situation.

Like she's on a high.

I'll also uphold confidentiality and avoid specifics, but previously, while tackling a difficult case requested of her, Ms. Kyoko had pulled consecutive all-nighters—at that time, the usually smiling Ms. Kyoko apparently unleashed a torrent of verbal abuse upon an innocent individual who was sincerely acting as her assistant out of pure goodwill.

Thus, sleep deprivation can have a profound negative impact on personality and character—this time, however, such developments seem unlikely so far. Well, sleep deprivation resulting from overwork and sleep deprivation resulting from having all work canceled are likely completely different things.

If an important role of sleep is to rest the brain, not just the body, then Ms. Kyoko's brain cells, having done no work—meaning no reasoning—for a whole week since solving the marine microplastic release incident at the beach, might have been resting all along. Like a computer in sleep mode (this analogy is very ironic).

A long rest like a bonus time.

No wonder she's on a high.

"However, if the client is entirely the same, then confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements don't apply. Only for requests from you can I operate—you are my savior, Mr. Yakusuke, saving me from starvation for money—no, for mysteries."

So that's the starvation she meant.

Starving for mysteries, not food—for a moment it sounded like money, but perhaps her tongue slipped due to the symptoms of insomnia.

Also, her previous line proved that she hadn't slept a wink, let alone poorly, for at least a week—she called me 'Mr. Yakusuke' instead of 'Mr. Kakushidate,' which she should have done if it were our 'first meeting.' Unless we were partners who had overcome a life-or-death situation together a week ago (well, it was that kind of case. That case burdened with humanity's karma), I wouldn't be called that.

And it certainly made sense.

It made perfect sense, almost too good to be true.

What confidentiality protects, along with secrets, is, needless to say, the client. Meaning, the confidentiality regarding the beach incident works for my benefit—conversely, there's no need to invoke confidentiality towards me.

I am the exception, not the victim in this context.

You could say that precisely because I am constantly dressed in false accusations with the regularity Ms. Kyoko changes clothes, I was able to quietly provide a request before Ms. Kyoko starved for mysteries. Also, if I hadn't suffered that false accusation a week ago, the insomniac Ms. Kyoko would have had to refuse even my request as a regular client.

The thought sends a chill down my spine.

You might suspect my duplicity, thinking I could just hire another detective in that case, but while another might substitute for the marine microplastic release incident, this time, I absolutely needed Ms. Kyoko—not a second-gear detective or a third-gear detective, but the top-gear, swiftest detective.

After all, the one kidnapped was...

A baby less than six months old—which directly means that I am suspected of kidnapping a baby less than six months old.

I'd rather release giant plastics into the ocean than do something like that, and even abandoning my own convenience, there's no time to suspect me—even though I've only worked as a babysitter for a few days, I've grown attached.

I want to help even if it means paying the detective fee—specifically, it would mean throwing away the compensation and damages I received from the false accusation a week ago, but if it can save myself, the baby, and moreover, Ms. Kyoko from starvation, I don't regret it at all.

I won't hold onto overnight compensation money.

Let's convert compensation into a detective fee.

"Yes. Of course, I'll take the case. Please let me solve the mystery quickly—If I exert my brain even a little, perhaps I might be able to sleep."

The master detective, now exclusively mine at least until her insomnia is cured, said this while making a V-sign—she's not usually someone who does that, so it seems the lack of sleep itself is indeed affecting her thinking.

Will this turn out to be good or bad fortune?

Or perhaps, will it turn out to be 'today's' fortune?

4

While Ms. Kyoko was greeting the homeowners of the Raise residence, Mr. Senzo Raise (husband) and Ms. Eie Raise (wife) (here, they did exchange business cards, naturally—if one seeks flawless swiftness, there are formalities not to be forgotten), let me explain the background leading up to the incident.

Which is to say, the circumstances of my job change—the Raise couple, both independent entrepreneurs, were dizzyingly busy. This was true even during the birth of their only daughter, little Toka (daughter)—Ms. Eie's story of 'working right up until the day of delivery and being back at the office just one month later' might have been told like a heroic tale in the good old days, but nowadays, it fundamentally shouldn't be perceived that way.

Therefore, in line with modern morals, the dual-income couple (albeit somewhat unconventionally) decided to hire a babysitter. However, things don't proceed simply enough for the problem to be solved just like that—while adhering to morals, 'reality' hasn't quite caught up with the 'present' in some aspects, and regarding childcare, supply doesn't necessarily meet demand (conversely, demand doesn't meet supply either, so the mechanisms of economics are complex—bizarrely complex), and also, perhaps having inherited her parents' independence, little Toka was, if one could say so, a relatively 'high-maintenance baby.'

'Low-maintenance baby' is also a strange phrase, but still, relatively speaking.

Enough that the poorly paid babysitters they hired kept quitting one after another—though one can't help but think it might be because they hired them at low pay, perhaps the fact that they didn't consider 'let's raise the salary then' is characteristic of them both being CEO spouses.

They decided.

To hire a young person who had no choice but to jump in, regardless of such harsh working conditions or low pay—that is, me.

Yakusuke Kakushidate.

Now, I wasn't exactly struggling financially even in this recession, as I receive compensation and damages every time I'm falsely accused or fired for it, but if I don't maintain some form of social standing by 'working,' in my case, there's a risk I could be arrested just from being stopped for questioning.

Experience tells me I'm most susceptible to false accusations when unemployed—no, no, if pointed out that I've been under suspicion while employed last time, this time, and even the time before that, I'd be speechless, but still, I don't want to give up; I want to take every possible precaution.

Do everything possible and wait for the detective.

My spirit of self-improvement and the Raise couple's parsimony—or rather, frugality—coincided, meaning the demand line and supply line miraculously met, and my job search concluded successfully. Just like with the beachsaver job, perhaps they thought my large frame seemed reliable for protecting a baby—in reality, I have no martial arts experience or anything, just a uselessly large person, but I'm not such an honest narrator as to write that on my resume.

I welcome those kinds of misunderstandings.

Of course, having no experience as a babysitter, let alone helping with someone else's child-rearing, I was incredibly anxious and tense, but apparently, I was suited for soothing children, or at least seemed compatible with little Toka (since it was true she was 'high-maintenance,' I didn't feel that way myself, but if her parents said so, I wanted to accept that evaluation). Warming milk, changing diapers, putting her to sleep—there was much to do, more physically demanding than some actual physical labor, but I even felt a sense of fulfillment in the act of nurturing life.

Having bounced from job to job, feeling like each occupation was just a perch until the next one, I even thought that perhaps being a babysitter was my true calling—right up until the moment little Toka was kidnapped under my supervision, that is.

"I see, so this is the nursery—hmm?"

Having finished meeting with the Raise couple, Ms. Kyoko seemed to grasp something immediately upon entering the room—it seems my worrying about her intuition being dulled by insomnia was just my overanxious imagination.

If anything, perhaps her brain, cooled by this week's accidental vacation, is even sharper than usual—to immediately sense something unnatural in this room, which screams 'nursery' with its baby crib, mobile, panel mats laid on the floor, and primary-colored wallpaper adorned with characters.

"My line didn't echo at all—was this originally a soundproof room? Did one of the couple perhaps enjoy playing the piano?"

"You're right about the soundproof room. But not 'originally.' I thought the same when I first found out, but the Raises are apparently pure entrepreneurs, not musicians."

"? A soundproof room without playing music? Since sound doesn't reverberate, it doesn't seem like an AV room either."

Ms. Kyoko tilted her head.

Seeing that gesture, thinking it's that of an insomnia patient, makes it look like she's sleepily nodding off—preconceptions are dangerous.

As dangerous as kidnapping.

"It was originally a normal room, but they renovated it to be soundproof like this after finding out about the wife's pregnancy—uh, basically, so the baby's crying wouldn't disturb the neighbors, and such."

"Hmm."

"Of course, it's not like she's locked up in here 24/7, it's treated strictly as little Toka's bedroom, but—"

"Hmm, hmm."

Ms. Kyoko nodded as if understanding the explanation.

Understanding, or perhaps finding it unique.

Or perhaps finding the ways of the rich incomprehensible—it's somewhat understandable in terms of being mindful of the neighbors' eyes (or ears), but it undeniably feels excessive, and in fact, one could argue that little Toka was kidnapped precisely because of it.

A cruel irony.

However, according to the Raise couple, it's not irony at all, but squarely my crime, my fault—as the hired babysitter, it's undeniably my blunder.

I bear responsibility, not just morally, but professionally.

Having received positive feedback, the reprimand hits hard.

That said, the couple hasn't resorted to tying me up and torturing me; they allow me free movement within the confines of the Raise residence—that's precisely why I was able to call Ms. Kyoko. The insomniac Forgetful Detective.

The threatening phone call immediately after little Toka's disappearance was discovered reportedly included the standard phrase 'Don't contact the police' along with a demand for a large ransom, but it didn't say not to call a detective—I, too, am a seasoned False Accusations King, quite accustomed to calling detectives.

"I see, I see. So, little Toka was kidnapped from the baby crib in this nursery."

"Yes. Although, whether you can really call it a kidnapping... From my perspective, having been in the room with her, it was like she was spirited away."

"The culprit was a god?"

"No, of course not. I'm not much for paranormal mysteries."

"Well then, let me first confirm, the culprit isn't you, Mr. Yakusuke—right? If it were, I could possibly step in to negotiate and set a realistic ransom amount."

'The baby's life comes first, after all'—Ms. Kyoko says plausibly, but if Ms. Kyoko got involved, I feel like both sides would be charged hefty commissions. A structure ripe for skimming off the top.

Wait, no, no.

Accusing me of being the culprit is an outrageous claim.

This master detective seems to have a habit of not trusting her clients—I had thought she suspected me first every time we met, but apparently, this tendency remains even when her memory is continuous. The trust relationship built during the last case means nothing, it seems.

It's generally said that master detectives, overly accustomed to the 'unexpected culprit,' start by suspecting those closest—perhaps Ms. Kyoko suffered a terrible betrayal by a client early in her career.

Even if she did, she wouldn't remember it, though.

It happens every time, but I'm shocked every time.

"Rest assured. I swear to God, I am not the kind of person who would kidnap a baby. I swear to a God who doesn't spirit people away."

"It would be reassuring if you were the culprit, though. The case would be solved right here—however, you are indeed correct, Mr. Yakusuke."

"? Correct about what?"

Not realizing it myself, I wondered if I had uttered such lightning-fast reasoning, but,

"With normal imagination, one would think kidnapping a baby for profit just isn't worth it."

Ms. Kyoko continued.

In a quiet tone.

"After all, they die if left alone—the guardian has to take care of every single thing. If they can't even eat independently, they're far too much trouble as a hostage."

Hmm.

It's a dryly realistic opinion, but it's true. While many mammals stand on their own feet right after birth, human child-rearing has one of the highest costs among all life forms—it could also be said to have the highest risks.

This applies even if the kidnapped wasn't an infant, but to make negotiations successful, the hostage must be kept alive.

From that perspective, the kidnapper who still took the baby must have been confident in keeping the baby alive—in other words, confident in protecting her.

"So the culprit is the babysitter—wait, why me?"

"I think it's a reasonable deduction."

"Please stop suspecting me. It's a waste of time."

"Spoken like a true culprit."

While exchanging light banter, Ms. Kyoko examines the room—searching for evidence left by the kidnapper, starting from behind the curtains, thoroughly checking even under each panel of the floor mat, turning them over one by one.

If left alone, she looks like she might start peeling off the primary-colored wallpaper.

"Well, that was reasoning based on the culprit's conscience, or perhaps wisdom; as a detective, I must also consider cases where that's not true."

"—They never intended to guarantee little Toka's life from the start? They think the deal can still be made?"

"Essentially, they just need to make the couple believe she's alive—you mentioned hearing hysterical crying during the threatening phone call, but it could have been a tape recording."

The use of the word 'tape' hints at the era associated with the forgetful Ms. Kyoko—one might think that with a week of continuous memory, she'd have had a chance to learn about voice memo apps.

"I was nearby during that call too, and even though it wasn't on speakerphone, the crying was loud enough to be heard. As someone who served little Toka as her babysitter, let me testify, that was not a recording."

It felt like a live broadcast.

It's just a feeling, but—Ms. Eie, who took the call, said the same thing, so perhaps we can assume that.

Or rather, we have to think that way.

What else can we do? Assume the hostage is already dead and report it to the police immediately?

"Rationally, that's correct, but I am here to deny that rationality."

Indeed, while a detective as a profession might be logical, a master detective is often not a rational being—the Forgetful Detective might be the extreme north of that. Well, a rational person wouldn't normally jump at a mystery in the midst of insomnia.

The sensation of starving for mysteries is unique.

"By the way, there isn't one, is there."

"Huh?"

"A surveillance camera. In this room. Despite entrusting a baby to a bare stranger."

Her almost pointed pairing of words, 'baby/bare', nearly made me miss it, but I was the 'bare stranger' she meant—perhaps getting shocked every single time I remembered the suspicion against me hadn't cleared was simply a waste of time.

Setting up surveillance cameras for employers to manage and supervise workers sounds quite dystopian, but in modern times with advanced electronics, the idea itself might actually fall into the retro category.

Conversely, the demand for a forgetful detective who values the protection of personal information could be said to be ever-increasing—if her insomnia gets cured, I mean.

"Nowadays, that's called a baby monitor. It's a device to watch over the baby, and the video can be sent wirelessly to a smartphone or similar device. Do you understand 'wireless'?"

"I'm not five hundred years old or anything."

Ms. Kyoko rolled up her left sleeve, asserting her age—honestly, whether the number '25' written there can be trusted is debatable. The truth is known only to the person herself, one might say, but regarding this, there's a possibility even she doesn't know.

She might actually be a teenager.

"Apparently there used to be one. Not a camera to monitor me, but a camera to watch over the baby—however, it was removed soon after."

"Why was that? Did the worker go on strike?"

"If anyone went on strike, it was little Toka, you could say. She seemed to really hate being watched by the camera."

Hysterically crying.

Apparently—as long as the camera lens was pointed at her, she continued to wail.

A baby couldn't possibly understand the concept of a camera, nor wireless technology, let alone the concept of babysitting, but nevertheless, little Toka was extremely sensitive to being 'watched over.'

Intuitively sensitive.

I kind of get it.

Working in a room with a camera installed feels uncomfortable, like you're not trusted—'watching over' sounds nice, but essentially, you're being watched. Even if you rephrase it as 'baby monitor.'

My previous job as a beachsaver also had aspects of both watching over and watching out—the fact that I was falsely accused in such a role is less irony and more a structural flaw.

"But perhaps this means repeating that bitter experience—little Toka was a child who fussed not only at camera lenses but also at human eyes. If someone was watching her, she absolutely wouldn't sleep."

"Wouldn't sleep."

The insomniac Ms. Kyoko repeats with deep empathy—yes, I had noticed that commonality. Though comparing her to a baby felt inappropriate, so I didn't say it.

"The feeling of not wanting to sleep where people are watching is something I can comprehend, but she was quite a delicate child, wasn't she."

"Delicate doesn't quite capture it. Sensitive is closer to my gut feeling. So much so that when putting her to sleep, I absolutely had to turn my back."

"Turn your back—don't tell me..."

That's exactly it.

While I was in the same room, because I had turned my back to little Toka—the baby I was supposed to protect was kidnapped.

Right before my eyes—no, right behind my back.

"The soundproof room is sealed, but it wasn't locked, so it's not a locked room. However, when the couple both left for work, the front door and other entrances should have been locked, so you could say the entire Raise residence was, in a sense, a large locked room."

Incidentally, I'm the only one employed here.

Although the Raise couple are wealthy individuals in their own right, they don't employ other servants—they probably didn't intend to hire even a babysitter, if the baby monitor had worked.

'A high-maintenance baby.'

"That said, honestly, it's not the kind of impregnable locked room state you see in mystery novels. As long as the homeowners can come and go, there's no such thing as perfect security."

Hm.

Somehow, that also sounds like something a criminal would say—but it's true. Keys impossible to pick, computers impossible to hack, don't exist in principle. If you wanted to achieve a 'perfect locked room,' you'd have no choice but to encase all six sides in concrete—computers should also be disconnected from the net and, yes, encased in concrete.

Concrete is the master key.

"It's just like 'Handkerchief Drop,' isn't it? Kidnapping the baby by exploiting the momentary lapse when your back is turned."

Ms. Kyoko said this as if exasperated—whether she was exasperated by my incompetence or the culprit's audacity, I couldn't tell.

Either way, I had to make the necessary correction.

"It wasn't just a moment. While little Toka was sleeping, I made sure not to look—it's strange, but if I tried to check her sleeping face, she'd instantly pop her eyes wide open."

Enough to make me think she was pretending to sleep, testing the babysitter—no, her parents also mentioned struggling with the same reaction from little Toka.

Nevertheless, why does a baby's cry sound so accusatory to adults? Even when you haven't done anything wrong, it makes you feel guilty—that has a sense of false accusation in itself.

"In principle, 'feeling gazes on your skin' shouldn't be possible, though."

"That's not quite true, Mr. Yakusuke. Gazes aside, you should be able to sense presence. Otherwise, 'Handkerchief Drop' wouldn't work as a game."

That's true.

You can sense someone behind you through footsteps, breathing, or even air currents—saying the baby was kidnapped because I happened to have my back turned is no excuse at all.

(To reiterate) I am not the kidnapper.

I haven't committed the crime. But I bear responsibility. Grave responsibility.

"The fact that this scene is a soundproof room also seems to be a contributing factor. The mats laid on the floor might also be why footsteps weren't heard."

Yes, it might be a contributing factor.

But perhaps it's more accurate to call it a remote cause—even a soundproof room can't eliminate sound completely, and the mats on the floor aren't laid for that purpose. They are strictly mats to prevent the baby from getting injured.

Since it's not a perfect sound-dampening device, it cannot serve as a factor to cover my negligence—it offers no room for explanation, and for the couple, I am undoubtedly as good as the culprit.

Even if not the one who carried it out.

"They trusted me with her, I can only apologize. I truly can't face the Raise couple."

"You're such a good person, even after being overworked for low pay."

Ms. Kyoko, who had heard my hourly wage during the earlier meeting, shrugged—I'll take being called a good person as a compliment.

It's true my pay is small change. About as significant as my luck, probably.

I'm confident I chase after small change harder than any disgruntled customer chases after being short-changed.—Just to explain, that was a joke playing on, well, change.

"Speaking of getting what you pay for, though, if they hadn't scrimped and had hired a proper babysitter for a reasonable, if not high, amount, this might not have happened. As a result of cheaply hiring me, the Raise couple now have to scramble to raise an exorbitant ransom. The money they could access quickly wasn't enough, so they're consulting with a grandmother who lives far away, or something like that."

"Penny wise, pound foolish, is it? As a business owner myself, I should remember that."

'Though I'll forget when I sleep,' Ms. Kyoko added lightly—given her current insomnia, that felt even more off-target than my low-pay joke.

"Mr. Yakusuke, isn't it possible that you were asleep?"

"Eh?"

Did the topic suddenly jump?

No, it didn't jump.

"Are you suggesting that regardless of having my back turned, I might have accidentally dozed off during work hours, and she was kidnapped during that lapse?"

"I'm just eliminating possibilities one by one, but is it impossible?"

Her standard exhaustive deduction, huh.

Mmph, for me, who usually worries about 'Ms. Kyoko sleeping on the job and forgetting crucial reasoning,' to be suspected of napping myself—honestly, it's more offensive than being suspected as the culprit.

"It's true this childcare job is incredibly hard labor despite the low pay, but still, I wouldn't doze off while entrusted with a life. I'm not that kind of person. I'd stab my thigh with fire tongs to stay awake if necessary."

"You don't need to go that far."

She said calmly.

Did she accept it easily because, despite everything, there's still a strong bond of trust built from the job a week ago—though, given that the kidnapping happened anyway, even if I was awake, it was still my negligence.

"Besides, today little Toka slept peacefully for me. I wasn't tired enough to accidentally fall asleep."

"Is there a possibility you were drugged with a sleeping agent?"

That was the ultimate 'pot calling the kettle black' line, but that's unlikely too—the only things I consume in this house are my homemade lunchbox and coffee brought in a thermos flask.

"Aha. So no meals provided either, huh? Do you really have to be that thorough to become rich?"

"Makes you not want to become one, doesn't it."

"No, not at all."

Is that so.

In any case, whether by negligence or intentionally by the culprit, the possibility that I was sleeping on the job is non-existent—

"In that case, is the culprit a ninja? Did they descend from the ceiling on a rope and snatch little Toka sleeping in the baby crib?"

How serious she was, I couldn't tell, but Ms. Kyoko actually looked up at the ceiling as she said that—well, even if the ninja part is a joke, if they came down from the ceiling, there would be no footsteps, perhaps? But, setting aside whether the ceiling of this Raise residence has such a mechanism—even if it were a suspended ceiling.

"Even from the ceiling, I don't think it's possible to take little Toka away without making her cry, meaning without waking her up? Whether you call it colic or something else—she reacts even just to gazes, let alone being picked up."

"Isn't that the same even if not from the ceiling?"

Now that she mentions it, yes.

Even if there was a ninja—so stealthy as to approach without my dull senses noticing, without making a sound, without giving off any presence—at that point, they're less a ninja and more an assassin after my life—little Toka wouldn't be like that.

If the baby started wailing, there's no way I wouldn't notice, whether my back was turned or I was asleep.

Her cry is enough to bring the dead back to life.

"Or perhaps, they used chloroform or something to instantly put little Toka to sleep—no, that's no good. She was already sleeping."

Besides, sleeping pills or anesthesia are dangerous for babies. Since their bodies are small, the effect is direct and could lead to permanent sleep, not just temporary slumber.

"Mr. Yakusuke, wouldn't you notice in that case?"

"Huh?"

"I'm talking about the case where the baby is killed 'silently' right behind you. Wouldn't you notice?"

"..."

Even knowing she's just talking about possibilities, it's a chilling possibility—well, in that case, there certainly wouldn't be any 'wailing.'

"Setting aside the crying heard over the threatening phone call for a moment, right?"

"Yes. That would be the case."

"Hmm."

Regardless of the specific method used—I don't even want to imagine—killing a baby 'silently' and 'instantly' 'without presence,' isn't that something even a ninja or an assassin couldn't achieve? If they could do that, they could probably kidnap her without being noticed too—there's no need to go all the way and take her life.

Just because she's a 'high-maintenance baby,' doesn't mean you have to take matters into your own hands.

Setting aside ethics and morals, keeping the hostage alive, if possible, undoubtedly makes subsequent negotiations more advantageous.

"Probably so. I was just asking."

As if having already lost interest in my answer, Ms. Kyoko grabbed the rail of the baby crib and started rattling it from the outside—what on earth is she doing?

"No, I was just wondering if there might be a trick involving the baby crib."

"A trick, you say?"

"Well, like stage magic. The baby sinking deep into the soft mattress. Or being wrapped up inside the folded towels—doesn't seem likely."

The baby who seemed to have disappeared was merely hidden inside the baby crib, and after I foolishly rushed out of the room, the culprit who had infiltrated the residence calmly sneaked into the nursery without worrying about being seen—but when would they install such a contraption-like baby crib in the nursery?

As a puzzle, it's quite rugged and interesting, but it's hard to imagine the mechanism activating silently—besides, I don't know (or remember) a baby's sensations, but would they remain unresponsive if something like ground subsidence happened in their bed?

Far from wailing, it's a terrifying phenomenon that could cause convulsions.

Even if the mechanism operated smoothly—without a hitch—the culprit would still have to perform a normal kidnapping afterwards. Even if I noticed little Toka's absence and rushed out of the room, I wouldn't leave the house—the moment she was taken out of the soundproof room, little Toka's cries would echo not just throughout the house, but throughout the neighborhood. Surely the baby crib wouldn't function like a self-driving stroller and carry out the kidnapping on its own.

"Do self-driving strollers exist nowadays?"

"Ah, no. It was just an analogy."

"Thought so. There seems to be no trick with this baby crib either—it's just an ordinary cage."

I wish she wouldn't call it a cage, but well, it is like a cage—trick or no trick, for a baby, it's practically an inescapable locked room (meaning, the possibility that little Toka quietly woke up and voluntarily left the nursery is also nil).

Unfortunately, this cage didn't seem to protect her from the kidnapper—as the 'guard,' no, the 'childminder,' I feel utterly pathetic.

"Hmm. I think that covers most patterns. Except for the possibility that you, Mr. Yakusuke, are the culprit."

"That's the possibility I'd like you to eliminate first."

"Well then, let's try an experiment here. To see if Mr. Yakusuke's testimony has credibility or not—let's indulge in a game of 'Handkerchief Drop'."

Saying this, Ms. Kyoko actually took out a folded handkerchief from her pocket—it was a pure white handkerchief, the color of her hair.

7

Handkerchief Drop.

I thought she was just speaking metaphorically, but I never dreamed I'd end up engaging in such a childish game with Ms. Kyoko.

It feels less like a dream and more like a hallucination seen during a sleepless night—as if I were the one suffering from insomnia.

"Playing regular Handkerchief Drop won't serve as verification, so let's reverse the rules—it's a game where I, the 'it' player, stealthily approach and pick up the handkerchief that has been placed behind you, Mr. Yakusuke, without you noticing."

Not Handkerchief Drop, but Handkerchief Pickup.

Or rather, rule-wise, it might be closer to 'Red Light, Green Light'.

"That's right. Or maybe 'Kick the Can'—though you mustn't kick the baby."

"Obviously. Colic maybe, but not kicking."

"You mustn't kidnap either. Mr. Yakusuke, please sit hugging your knees around the center of the room. I'll place this handkerchief right behind you. I'll start plastered against the wall, like a 'wallflower', seize an opportunity when you're not paying attention, approach, and go pick up that handkerchief. If you think the handkerchief has been picked up, turn around—if I can get back to the wall before you turn around, you are the culprit."

Eh? My guilt will be proven by such a game? Things have suddenly taken a stormy turn—also, the expression 'wallflower' is kind of dated.

"*Giggle*. My dream is to use newspaper as wallpaper, you know. I want to be surrounded by all sorts of crime articles."

"Doesn't that make you sound more like a dangerous criminal?"

Rather than a detective.

While saying this, I temporarily moved the baby crib aside and, as instructed by Ms. Kyoko, sat down in the middle of the nursery—and just as told, I sat hugging my knees. I wondered why she specified the posture beyond the location, but I see, this posture immobilizes both hands and feet.

Even for someone like me accustomed to being restrained, this was unforeseen.

Meaning, my movements are sealed, and I must rely solely on my senses—it's not the exact same situation as when little Toka was kidnapped, but it's reasonably close. I had tried to minimize my movements as much as possible, not just turning my back, to avoid waking little Toka.

"Alright. I've placed the handkerchief. I'm moving back to the wall now. Turning around early due to a false start also makes you guilty."

The judiciary is excessively strict.

What a night watch state—speaking of which, wasn't that famous painting by Rembrandt found to be a daytime scene after restoration? I felt I could make a clever satirical remark connecting that incident to insomnia, but this wasn't the time for it.

To prove my innocence, I must play with Ms. Kyoko with all my might—through the faintly audible footsteps, or perhaps the slight vibrations through the floor mats, I can vaguely sense Ms. Kyoko walking towards the wall.

As expected, even wearing slippers, even tiptoeing stealthily, or even being a master detective, walking in complete silence and with perfect lack of vibration is impossible—no, maybe she's just not serious yet because the game hasn't started. Though I wonder what 'serious tiptoeing stealth' even means—

"Okay. I've reached the wall. About five steps at my pace. Perhaps three for you, Mr. Yakusuke—now then, open the game!"

For a children's game, the starting call sounded like something from a casino—I closed my eyes and focused. If only I had done this back then, I think—realistically, as a babysitter, can I truly say I wasn't careless at all?

Faced with the situation where the difficult little Toka was actually sleeping, there must have been at least some relaxation—even if I wasn't dozing, if accused of treating work time like break time, I'd have no words in return.

Even if this game doesn't prove my guilt, if the Raise couple sues me for dereliction of duty, I'll probably have to meekly accept the consequences.

Has the time finally come for this False Accusations King to pay his dues—and so.

While I, having made a blunder, was steeling myself with completely misplaced resolve, there was, however, absolutely no movement from Ms. Kyoko—I felt no footsteps, no vibrations, no breathing, no air currents. I don't know if such things can even be felt, but I also didn't sense the body heat—or something like it—of a living creature approaching.

Even though I'm a regular client of the Forgetful Detective.

Feeling that much would make me seem less like a regular client and more like a pervert, but on the other hand, it's a fact that I sense no presence whatsoever—an unnaturalness noticeable not because I detected movement, but because of the lack of movement.

Could it be a stalling tactic?

Indeed, this game had no time limit.

Is she staying by the wall, waiting for my concentration to break?

I see, that would indeed replicate the situation at the time of the incident—forcing excessive tension on me by talking about proving guilt, then aiming for the drop in alertness that follows, a tactic to synchronize my current self with my past self?

A good tactic, but once I figure it out beforehand, I can't easily let my tension drop either—on the contrary, I feel I must maintain a state of maximum tension. Conversely, can Ms. Kyoko, who only sees my back, even tell? The moment my concentration, my tension, breaks—

"Alright. Kidnapping complete."

"Eh?"

As if timing it perfectly for the moment my concentration peaked, Ms. Kyoko said that, and I instinctively turned around—damn it, it's a trick! I was told beforehand that a false start meant guilt, yet I fell for such a simple fake and turned around—but that was wrong too.

It wasn't a basic fake like declaring she had 'kidnapped' the handkerchief before actually doing so, to make me panic and turn around—because Ms. Kyoko, standing by the wall where I turned to look, was indeed fluttering the pure white handkerchief.

Still unwilling to concede defeat, wondering if that handkerchief was a spare, I quickly glanced down at the floor, but there was nothing there. My posture simply ended up looking like I was hanging my head in defeat.

What the heck, now I'm the kidnapper!

No, that can't be right.

While I should reflect on what needs reflecting, putting aside the feeling that I won't let a verdict be decided by such a game—I cannot accept such foul play.

"Ms. Kyoko. You didn't place it here from the beginning, did you? The handkerchief."

"Yes. I only said, 'I've placed the handkerchief.'"

Ms. Kyoko says nonchalantly, continuing to flutter the handkerchief—she shows no sign of remorse.

Nor any apparent shame.

"After that, still holding the handkerchief, I backed away to the wall. I haven't moved a single step since then. You didn't notice that, Mr. Yakusuke."

"S-So brazenly—"

If she didn't move a step, it's only natural I wouldn't notice without looking. Preventing the handkerchief from being picked up, or preventing the baby from being kidnapped, if it wasn't there from the start—

"Huh?"

Huh?

So this means—that was the experiment?

"Yes,"

Ms. Kyoko neatly folded the handkerchief she had been twirling— And then concealed it within her hand.

"The baby wasn't here from the start."

8

I was told something that sounded like the ending of a horror novel, but this was just Ms. Kyoko's lack of words due to sleep deprivation; in reality, it was the resolution to a very realistic mystery.

A realistic ending.

'Wasn't here from the start' was strictly limited to meaning that the baby wasn't present when I arrived for work at the Raise residence, and by extension, in the nursery, today—the person named Toka Raise does exist.

She just wasn't in the nursery.

Nor inside the baby crib.

If I had been told that before participating in the 'Handkerchief Pickup' experiment, I likely would have reacted like the stereotypical 'everyone,' thinking, 'No way, that's impossible, absolutely

absurd, an armchair theory—no, a baby crib theory'—I might have even blurted out, 'But I definitely saw her! Little Toka inside the baby crib!'

But I hadn't seen her.

Because—when I took over 'childminding' duties for little Toka, she was asleep.

No.

I was told 'she's asleep'—

"Mr. Yakusuke, when suspected of napping, you stated: 'Today little Toka slept peacefully for me'—a statement that could be interpreted in various ways, but conversely, it can also mean 'She was asleep from the start'—and if 'she was asleep from the start,' Mr. Yakusuke could not have confirmed it—could not have visually verified it. Couldn't see her sleeping face, or her sleeping form—because the baby, sleeping so soundly, might wake up if she feels a gaze, right?"

"..."

That's right.

I couldn't confirm—couldn't visually verify.

Meaning, at that point, I turned my back to little Toka—assuming she was there, I averted my gaze from the empty baby crib. Well, actually, it might not have been completely empty; there's a possibility they placed a rolled-up blanket or a similar-looking doll there—but I didn't even see that.

But of course, I'd assume she was there!

Just as I believed the trusted master detective when she said she placed the handkerchief, when told by the employers, her actual parents, that she had just fallen asleep, I would assume the baby was sleeping there—

"...Then, are the kidnappers the Raise couple?"

"That would seem to be the case. If they told such a lie."

Not spirited away by gods, but hidden away by parents.

‘They hired Mr. Yakusuke for low pay intending from the start to make him a scapegoat’—Ms. Kyoko stated this bluntly, offering no comfort or salvation.

No.

There is salvation.

"...If the Raise couple are the culprits, then little Toka is safe, right? With that method, there's absolutely no need to harm their own child."

"You're such a good person, it almost makes me sleepy."

'Mr. Yakusuke, you'll really be found guilty someday'—Ms. Kyoko kindly warned me, but I doubt there's any fear of that.

As long as the swiftest, yet forgetful master detective exists, I will not spend sleepless nights.

9

What follows is less the truth and more just the circumstances, but if one respects the opinion that 'regardless of motive, a crime is a crime and cannot be excused. Who cares about the criminal's side of the story,' then similarly, one cannot help but consider the Raise couple's perspective as well.

Though, saying something so grand, my guess at their motive was utterly typical and off the mark—I assumed they had pretended their child was kidnapped to cover up some business loss on the books, making it look like they paid a ransom, or something like that.

But that wasn't it.

On the contrary, both their businesses were sailing smoother than smooth—not a hint of loss, in fact, they were on a steady upward climb.

So much so that they couldn't even find time for their newborn child.

Ms. Eie's heroic tale of working until the day of delivery and returning to work immediately wasn't an exaggeration at all—and for Mr. Senzo too, being present for the birth was beyond a dream.

Paternity leave?

'There's no one to replace you, just leave the child-rearing to someone else—don't say such ordinary things, you're chosen wealthy people.'

The contradiction should have been found not in the similarity but in the fact that a couple who would build a soundproof room for childcare hired a babysitter for low pay—baby monitor or not, they didn't want to hire servants.

They wanted to raise their child themselves.

Yet even in this recession, job seekers with reasons (like me) appear, willing to work for low pay under harsh conditions—so they decided to turn that situation to their advantage.

A staged kidnapping.

Moreover, a kidnapping resulting from the hired babysitter's failure—to demonstrate to those around them, in the clearest possible way, that they had no choice but to raise the child themselves after all.

Incidentally, little Toka was left with her grandmother, and the threatening phone call also came from there—meaning, the grandmother living far away, who was supposedly being consulted for fund-raising, was also an accomplice.

No, maybe even little Toka, whose ear-splitting cries echoed over the phone—too?

No wonder they disliked police intervention.

They probably wanted to avoid detective intervention too, originally—the silver lining was that Kyoko Okitegami is the Forgetful Detective.

She will soon forget the motive she pointed out, 'parenting-neurosis'—no, 'unable-to-parent-neurosis'—as for me, falsely accused, I decided to hold my tongue on the condition that I receive my unpaid wages and the couple undergoes counseling.

Let sleeping dogs lie.

I understand the sharp criticism that such tolerance does absolutely nothing for the individuals involved, nor for society, but then again, it's not really for the couple's sake—it's for little Toka's sake.

The thought of little Toka finding out when she grows up that she was subjected to a staged kidnapping by her own parents gives me extreme nightmares— Well, if I could speak selfishly myself, if I resented people every time I was suspected or falsely accused, I wouldn't have enough bodies to go around.

If you won't forget, then I, like the detective, will try to forget.

Speaking of waking up, what happened to Ms. Kyoko's insomnia?

Don't worry.

It's true that her inability to sleep left some anxiety regarding the concealment of the couple's 'circumstances,' but perhaps this recent mystery-solving provided just the right amount of strain for the master detective's brain—or perhaps my arguments were genuinely sleep-inducing—when I returned to the nursery after discussing things with the Raise couple, I found Ms. Kyoko slumped against the baby crib, fast asleep. Thinking about her waking up in an unfamiliar house, in an unfamiliar nursery, with no memory of anything, gives me a headache requiring a health insurance card, but putting that aside.

The Forgetful Detective, sleeping for the first time in a week, had an innocent sleeping face, far more like a baby's than my own proven-innocent self.

Kyoko Okitegami's Insomnia—Forgotten

第二証

掟上今日子の親知らず

Ch 2: Kyoko Okitegami’s Wisdom Tooth

1

"P—Please, let me call a detective!"

Even though I (Yakusuke Kakushidate) knew that shouting like this again would only make people think, 'Oh boy, there goes False Accusations Kid saying something again,' I shouted anyway—yes, it was precisely False Accusations Kid saying something.

It would be a problem if they didn't listen.

Because I was talking.

Of course, I would be in trouble, but the justice system of this country, and by extension, all its citizens, would be in trouble too—all its citizens in the sense of good, law-abiding people, of course.

If a wrongful conviction occurs in a country governed by law, trust in the justice system plummets, which is why I cannot allow myself to be falsely accused—even good, law-abiding citizens would surely hate to live in fear that one day, suddenly, like being hit by an absurd traffic accident out of the blue, they might be arrested for a crime they didn't commit (although, even absurd traffic accidents usually have some underlying logic, like ignoring a signal, speeding, or perhaps driving without a license or under the influence; we mustn't forget there's often a cause resembling a 'crime'—must not forget).

Furthermore, one must never, ever lose sight of the fact that one wrongful conviction creates one instance of 'not guilty,' one instance of 'acquittal' for the real culprit.

It's often said that the most critical problem with wrongful convictions is that arresting the wrong person lets the real criminal go free—the argument being that the freed criminal, receiving no punishment and thus no chance for reform or rehabilitation, is more likely to commit a second or third crime.

Bad citizens end up mixing with the good ones.

Convicting the innocent means acquitting the guilty.

Though when people say that's the most important issue, as the one actually suffering the false accusation, I feel like saying something (like, 'Yes, that's certainly a problem, but isn't an innocent person being thrown in jail also important?'), well, in terms of societal impact, it's generally correct—there's also the heartless theory that as long as a 'culprit' is caught, whether wrongly accused or not, other good citizens can live peacefully, but we can't adopt that.

I can't be locked up as someone else's scapegoat. Especially not as a criminal's scapegoat—which is why I'm shouting again today. For my own freedom, for the peace of society, for the tranquility of the world.

Please let me call a detective.

As loud as I possibly can.

Hoping it reaches even a meter farther.

However, the complexity of this world means that this anguished, death-rattle-like scream doesn't always resonate the same way—you might think all false accusations are the same, but, strange as it sounds, while there's no distinction between 'good false accusations' and 'bad false accusations' (they're uniformly 'bad'), there are 'unpleasant false accusations' and 'more unpleasant false accusations' (there are no 'well-liked false accusations'—strictly speaking, 'almost none.' I was once accused of the revolutionary crime of overthrowing a state under terrible misrule—while still in Japan. That was an exceptionally honorable charge, but, well, it was still uncomfortable, and though I hesitated, I properly called a detective and had the proud suspicion cleared).

Well, even if I can't be picky, some false accusations just make you sigh, 'Please spare me from this one'—and at times like those, naturally, there's more force in my shout.

This time, there was force. You could say I was using every last ounce of my strength.

Because death was involved.

That said, I'm used to being accused of murder, in a bad way. It's a felony, undeniably a heinous crime, but precisely because of that, for a habitual false-accusation magnet like me, it also means I can confidently call a reliable detective—for the detectives hired, such cases are a chance to show their skills.

Finding pets and investigating affairs are important jobs too, but for those aspiring to be the kind of master detectives found in mystery novels, murder cases are the flower of the mystery genre.

Conversely, there are crimes in this world that evoke revulsion even in master detectives driven by intellectual curiosity—even in those master detectives who treat murder cases like sophisticated puzzles, in a way that could be called somewhat inappropriate. Hearing that, everyone probably thinks of their own trigger crime, but for me, it's the mutilation of a corpse.

Mutilation of a corpse.

A clear example might be a dismemberment murder—the act of cutting up a dead body fills me with, how should I put it, a physiological disgust. Not so much that I can't read mystery novels

featuring it (I accept fiction as fiction—I don't cut it up), but when I myself become the suspect in a real-life dismemberment murder, I feel, rather, like I'm being torn apart myself, an indescribable feeling—I feel like spitting out the cliché phrase of the False Accusations Kid, one I usually avoid because it's too much of a cliché: 'There's no way I'd do something like that!'

Strangely enough (truly strangely), in cases where someone was dismembered while alive (like being hit by a train—where I was suspected of being the conductor), while my condolences for the victim are sincere, my disgust remains within a normal range. Even in decapitation murders, my revulsion towards 'cutting off the head after death' is stronger than towards 'killing by cutting off the head'—I myself don't even understand why. I can rationally understand that the former is more brutal—with my head that hasn't been cut off.

Perhaps something happened in a past life.

Maybe I was the victim of a dismemberment murder in a past life—to be a dismemberment victim in a past life and False Accusations Kid in this one, I can't help but wonder what terrible deeds I must have committed in the life before that (or maybe I performed exceptionally good deeds, and this is the backlash). Anyway, this time, the false accusation is for mutilation of a corpse.

A wicked deed I did not commit.

To be precise, it's an additional charge to murder, but from my perspective, the murder charge is the additional one—I cannot possibly bear such a disgraceful false accusation.

Right, let's call a detective.

With a louder voice than usual.

To clear this false accusation, which I want cleared as soon as possible, it goes without saying that I must call the fastest detective—though forgetting it as soon as possible is something I cannot do.

2

"Nice to meet... ngh... you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, the detec... mmmph... tive."

Ms. Kyoko, elegantly wearing a purple outfit that could easily look garish, was shown into the police station's visitation room. However, she stumbled badly over her usual 'Nice to meet you' greeting—no, she wasn't stumbling.

Rather, you could see she was carefully minimizing her mouth movements, as if deliberately trying not to bite down—just like how she tilts her head slightly when playing dumb (like, 'Eh? I didn't say anything about a discount on the fee? Even if I did, I've forgotten'), she had her hand

on her face, but it seemed more like a gesture of stroking the inside of her cheek from the outside.

I could tell even through the acrylic partition of the visitation room.

"Ms. Kyoko, do you have a cavity?"

"No, it's a wisdom tooth."

Ms. Kyoko said with distaste—an unusual expression for her, as she usually maintains a business-like smile, at least while on the job.

"I used to pride myself on my whitening-bright teeth with not a single cavity, but it seems a wisdom tooth that couldn't read the room has started growing and is pressing against my molar."

'Hardly seems wise of it, like it has forgotten its manners,' she added—quite the venomous remark.

I believe they're called 'wisdom teeth' because of the age you get them, not because the tooth itself possesses any wisdom, but since the knowledgeable master detective said it, she surely knew that and was complaining deliberately. A complaint with a double meaning.

But still, a wisdom tooth...

All four of mine grew in normally and lined up with my existing teeth, so unfortunately, I couldn't offer Ms. Kyoko sympathy like, 'I know just how you feel.' However, for modern humans whose bite force is weakening and jaws are becoming relatively smaller, it's a serious affliction—I've always been blessed with good health, but in this case, perhaps being blessed with a good physique, and by extension, a good skeletal structure, was fortunate.

Wisdom teeth are also said to be prone to cavities due to their hard-to-brush position, but Ms. Kyoko's problem seemed to predate that.

"Yes. Even though I told it there's no more space to grow. How dare it push against my molar."

"Your wisdom tooth is also your molar, Ms. Kyoko."

"In that case, this child shows precious little wisdom about its parent's suffering."

She was clearly in a bad mood.

Well, there aren't many people who can live cheerfully while dealing with dental problems—Ms. Kyoko might be a master detective, but she's not superhuman. Pulling all-nighters makes her

normally grumpy, and insomnia can make her hyper—from what it seemed, unbearable pain was simply unbearable for her too.

"Cavities aren't something you can just 'sleep and forget,' are they?"

"On the contrary, the pain makes it extremely difficult to fall asleep. I'd like to be given anesthesia."

I recalled the numerous culprits who had tried various means to make Ms. Kyoko sleep to make her forget the truth she reached at the end of her deductions—this must be the line they most wanted to hear from Ms. Kyoko's lips: 'I'd like to be given anesthesia.'

"So, Mr. Kakushidate. My client, Yakusuke Kakushidate. I have a dentist appointment, so I will resolve this case promptly."

Fastest deduction is just what I wanted, but I don't like the reason why.

Even if just lip service, I wish she'd say it was for social justice—but since that very lip service provider is hurting, perhaps there's nothing we can do.

A dentist appointment.

I wonder if the appointment time has been added to the memo on her right arm—if so, she's using the trump card space of her bare skin as a regular memo pad.

Well, I suppose that happens.

Even master detectives have private lives—private lives protected by confidentiality.

Besides, though it's bad for Ms. Kyoko—in fact, the worst—it could be called a virtuous cycle, even if not exactly convenient.

A strange coincidence.

Because the trouble I'm currently facing is also—a dental problem.

3

"Teeth subtraction?"

"No, extraction—I haven't heard the details myself, though."

The detective who threw me in the holding cell stubbornly refused to tell me the specifics of the case—I can't blame him for this. In an interrogation aimed at obtaining a suspect's confession,

especially a 'disclosure of secret knowledge,' they can't just reveal everything from start to finish.

"Well, basically, it means that all the teeth had been removed from the discovered body."

Mutilation of a corpse—is what it is.

What a way to say 'basically'—I don't want the basics of that.

Although I mentioned earlier that I find cutting up a body after death more repulsive than killing by cutting off the head, regarding this, I must admit I feel a slight sense of relief that the act was apparently done post-mortem—having all your teeth pulled out while alive? That's torture.

Even if anesthesia was administered.

While it was happening, you'd probably want to say, 'Just kill me already'—while you still had teeth left to say it.

"Hmm. So, the anesthesia of death had already been administered—ouch."

The master detective's stylish line was ruined by her wisdom tooth—I wish she'd gone to the hospital first and taken a painkiller, but well, painkillers are effectively anesthesia. Practically speaking, it would be problematic if the master detective's grey matter slowed down, and even more problematic if she fell asleep.

Of course, saying I feel relief is only in comparison to having them extracted while alive; whether it's the neck or the teeth, mutilation of a corpse is mutilation of a corpse—it makes me extremely sick. So much so that I want to grind my teeth—no, the reality is more like my teeth feel numb.

The idea that one should respect the dead must be deeply ingrained in me for some reason—probably an extension of the belief that one should respect all deceased individuals, no matter how wicked they were.

This also connects to an affirmation of the death penalty system as 'forgiveness through death,' which makes things complicated for the False Accusations Kid.

"I see. Harming a dead body, in the sense of desecrating the dead, can be seen as a punishment worse than the death penalty—ouch. Was that your purpose, Mr. Kakushidate, when you extracted all the teeth from the victim you killed?"

"No, that wasn't the purpose—I mean, I didn't kill them. I didn't pull out any teeth. I did not mutilate the corpse."

It's fine that Ms. Kyoko always goes through the process of suspecting me—well, not fine—but the key point this time was precisely, 'Why did the real culprit extract all the victim's teeth after death?'

What the interrogator was trying to elicit from me was a 'disclosure of secret knowledge' regarding that point.

He acted as if he could send my case to the prosecutors anytime if I just explained that motive, but I couldn't possibly know, and I wouldn't possibly do it.

Even just denying it feels awful.

Just being suspected feels like an insult—is that true for all false accusations?

"It's certainly an understandable motive, though. Mutilating a corpse to inflict punishment—if you think of it as settling a grudge."

"Well then, maybe that's it?"

Ms. Kyoko replied, gently stroking her cheek, but things weren't that simple. She herself likely understood—this was the first step in deductive reasoning by elimination.

I'll play along, with this walk through possibilities.

"The detectives seem doubtful about how effective pulling out all the teeth is as a form of post-mortem revenge against the victim—I mean, it makes sense. It's inside the mouth, after all."

It's damage that wouldn't be seen if the mouth was kept closed.

It couldn't be called a punishment like displaying a severed head.

"I wonder about that. There is the philosophy that unseen style is what truly matters."

A very Ms. Kyoko-like opinion, given her particularity about fashion—even while enduring toothache, she refutes where refutation is due.

She doesn't do things halfway.

"Like teeth blackening in Japan?"

"I wouldn't say teeth blackening specifically. But even without pain, from a cosmetic standpoint, I don't think many people would want all their teeth pulled out. I hear there was once an actor

who had teeth extracted not for cavities but for a role, but that's not something most people can do."

I see.

Well, whether one is attached to their face or not, having one's face forcibly changed by tooth extraction probably isn't a pleasant experience—it might not go as far as 'a face even their parents wouldn't recognize,' but by doing so, can the culprit say they have fulfilled their grudge against the victim?

"Probably not. No, wait, there's the possibility that the victim was a dentist, and the culprit resented having had their face changed by a rough extraction from that dentist in the past, and took revenge after killing them—by the way, Mr. Kakushidate, have you ever had a tooth extracted?"

Why ask at this timing?

As if I held a grudge against dentists—an idea clearly born from Ms. Kyoko herself facing an extraction.

"Wisdom teeth aside, I've never had any teeth extracted. And besides, the victim wasn't a dentist. Just a regular office worker, apparently."

"There's no such thing as a regular office worker. Just like there's no such thing as an ordinary high school student you could find anywhere. Everyone is unique in their own way—ouch."

Even profound lines lose their punch when delivered while enduring tooth pain—though, of course, what she said is true.

That's why there's no need to become a 'special victim.'

"Then, how about the possibility that the culprit is a dentist? Mr. Kakushidate, do you have a dental license?"

"I do not."

Setting aside the suspicion directed at me, what's the idea behind the culprit being a dentist—no, wait, now that she mentions it, maybe it's a very natural idea. Originally, only dentists are supposed to perform tooth extractions on humans—though, a normal dentist wouldn't extract teeth from a corpse.

"There's no such thing as a normal dentist—"

Ms. Kyoko stopped herself mid-sentence.

This wasn't because of a pang of toothache, but seemingly because she was mindful of the time—yes, Ms. Kyoko had a dental appointment today. She's supposed to be the Forgetful Detective who performs the fastest deductions because her memory resets in a day, but rushing a deduction because of the next appointment makes her seem like, well, a normal master detective.

Are there no normal master detectives either?

"—Essentially, the case where a dentist who fell to darkness became the killer. In that case, they might use pliers as a weapon."

Fell to darkness.

That sounds like a relatively recent term; did she learn it this morning?

"I don't think there's a possibility that a dentist, or former dentist, is the culprit."

For the honor of dentists, I stated clearly—no matter how unwillingly Ms. Kyoko has to go to the dentist today, I couldn't have her unfairly accusing dentists just because of that.

"Oh? You defend them. Is there some conflict of interest?"

She's so suspicious.

Perhaps humans really do get prickly when their teeth hurt—I didn't want her taking it out on me, so I explained.

"A killer dentist sounds like something out of a horror movie, but I think it's different in this case—even if it's a weapon, the teeth were removed after death, and it's unlikely only cavities were removed."

While it's rare for someone like Ms. Kyoko to have no cavities at all, it's probably also rare for someone to have all their teeth be cavities. Without a specific reason, some treatment would likely have been sought before things got that bad.

"Also, the extraction method was apparently very amateurish."

"Amateurish."

"Yes—the detective didn't explicitly tell me so, but it seems the extraction was done with clumsy, amateurish technique, very roughly."

Since it was a post-mortem extraction, it didn't result in a horrific scene, but if the procedure had been done while alive, it would likely have been far worse than just a mouth full of blood. Like a killer, indeed, the person might have died from excessive bleeding due to the rough—or you could also say sloppy—work.

Messy work.

Even torture would probably be done more carefully.

That's likely why the possibility of a grudge (a reversed grudge?) came up first, and also why I, an amateur without a dental license, am suspected—ah, I should have gotten a dental license during my unemployed period.

To think I'd end up regretting this.

"Of course, there's the possibility that a professional dentist pretended to be an amateur and extracted them messily—but I think that would be difficult in reality. Deliberately performing a procedure poorly. It's like trying to change your handwriting."

It's literally surgery, but for tasks remembered by the hand rather than the head, trying to intentionally deviate from routine or manual often doesn't work well—maybe once or twice, but if continued, the ingrained skill will eventually reveal itself.

Extracting twenty-eight to thirty-two teeth, all poorly, might be impossible for a dentist, precisely because they are a dentist—wouldn't they, at least for some teeth, revert to their habitual technique and perform the procedure skillfully?

"Hmm. So, by process of elimination, we can say the culprit is not a dentist."

As if to say 'You haven't been eliminated yet,' Ms. Kyoko pointed to her own eyes with the index and middle fingers of the hand not holding her cheek, then aimed that V-sign at me through the acrylic panel—a hand gesture that was anything but peaceful.

"While we're at it, torturers are also removed from the suspect list. Mr. Kakushidate, any experience with torture?"

If I answered yes here, would I be removed from the suspect list—no, I'd just be charged with a different crime.

I wouldn't get out of the holding cell.

"Speaking of elimination, if we follow the format of mystery novels—a reason for extracting or damaging the victim's teeth that comes to mind is to conceal their identity."

Perhaps finding that more logical and understandable than an inexplicable, arguably irrational grudge, Ms. Kyoko stated this in a slightly calmer tone.

But immediately,

"However, the victim's identity has been established, correct?"

She retracted the hypothesis—well, that's also part of the elimination process. Consider every idea, then eliminate.

"Yes. As a regular—whether regular or not—office worker. Name, address, family structure, etc., are all clear."

Let me state for the record, I don't know this person at all.

Even when told, it didn't ring any bells whatsoever.

"Oh ho. You insist you have no acquaintance with the victim?"

"When you say 'no acquaintance,' it sounds like I targeted a stranger. Besides, 'you insist'?"

"Apologies. That's Kyoto dialect."

Maybe I should offer her some ochazuke tea rice and ask her to leave, as they do over there.

Through the acrylic panel.

Indeed, identifying an unknown body using dental treatment records is a commonly known technique—conversely, if the culprit wanted to hide the victim's identity, they would have to do something to those treatment marks.

These days, treated teeth aren't necessarily obvious silver or gold fillings; there are ceramic implants indistinguishable from natural teeth—an 'amateur' might not have been able to tell, so they perhaps decided to take the quick route and pull them all out. That's not inconceivable.

Rather than grinding each tooth down to change its shape, they chose the psychologically unsettling act of extracting them all—it's not impossible.

However, that's only if other concealment efforts were properly carried out.

"No matter how much pulling teeth changes one's appearance, the face wasn't injured, nor were the fingerprints filed off—and their driver's license and credit cards were in the wallet they were carrying."

"Does the presence of the wallet mean the motive wasn't money either?"

Ms. Kyoko nodded, eliminating another possibility as if on the side.

She's certainly sharp when it comes to money.

"Besides, identifying someone by dental X-rays is usually employed for burnt bodies, decomposed bodies, skeletal remains, or even mummies—that wasn't the case here, was it?"

"No. If the information I received in the interrogation room is accurate."

Though it might be a trick.

If they seriously suspect me—are the interrogators waiting with bated breath for me to say, 'No, I definitely burned the body'?

"Additionally, the irises were intact. Only the teeth were not intact."

"Irises?"

"Um, there's a technology called iris recognition—"

"I recall that, but isn't it uncommon?"

"Not really. Some smartphones use it for biometric unlocking."

"I see. Times change—are there any models that unlock with teeth?"

Surely not.

You'd have to re-register every time you got a cavity.

"If everything but the teeth was intact, what was the cause of death in the first place?"

"Strangulation, apparently. Using a rope."

"Oh ho. You know quite a lot."

Please stop talking as if I fell for a trick—this isn't 'secret knowledge' or anything.

It was information that was in the morning paper.

I read it before being thrown into the holding cell.

"And after killing, the teeth were extracted—compared to the method of corpse mutilation, it's, how should I put it, a normal way of killing."

Is there such a thing as a normal way of killing?

I thought about pointing that out, but there's no point nitpicking the master detective. And what she's saying is (characteristically for a master detective) true—setting aside my personal opinion that finds it hideous, despite putting so much effort into mutilating the corpse, the method of killing itself has to be called utterly mundane.

It lacks any individuality.

Simple, understandable, nothing noteworthy—perhaps not because of this, but the questioning on that point during the interrogation was brief and lenient.

It even felt calm.

"Conversely, if the motive wasn't revenge or hiding the victim's identity, then the culprit had a compelling reason why they absolutely had to extract all the victim's teeth—that's what it means, right?"

Ms. Kyoko summarized.

"If we can pinpoint that reason—or motive—it will directly clear the suspicion against Mr. Kakushidate, who lacks such a reason. Understood. This fastest detective will solve the case for you in ten minutes."

"T-Ten minutes?"

"Yes. Ten minutes sounds about right."

'Sounds about right' as in being enough time, or as in being a nice round number? Still, her undertaking the case like this was very reassuring—however, even without being a detective, I could guess that her dentist appointment must be rapidly approaching.

4

Since there's a limit to the visitation time anyway, having Ms. Kyoko shift into a higher gear than usual, for whatever reason, is nothing but appreciated. As a regular client, I'll gladly pay her fee, which will cover her dental treatment costs. I want Ms. Kyoko to receive good treatment, after all.

Though if I get released too early, there won't be much compensation or damages—no, saying that makes it sound like I'm getting falsely accused just for the compensation money. It's because I carelessly say things like this that I get called False Accusations Kid.

Adding insult to injury, or rather, adding false accusation upon false accusation.

"For convenience, I'll say the culprit was 'forced to extract all the teeth,' but let me preface this by noting they might do the same even in a 'most of the teeth' scenario—leaving just one or two unextracted teeth might feel unsettling for the culprit too."

Extracting teeth from a corpse is unsettling from the start, but perhaps that's just my personal feeling. It might not simply be a reason like 'if I'm going this far, I might as well finish the job,' but also a sense that being asked about the difference between 'extracted teeth' and 'unextracted teeth' would be problematic.

Hmm.

Does that mean there actually is a difference?

A reason to want to extract specific teeth—in an extreme case, perhaps the culprit only wanted to extract a single tooth. Yet, as camouflage, they extracted all the teeth—the reverse of hiding a tree in a forest.

Concealment like burning down the forest to hide the fact that one tree was felled—I had thought this corpse mutilation was based on cruelty, but hearing it put that way, it does have a somewhat rational aspect.

A cruel rationality, though...

"Then, Ms. Kyoko. What kind of secret could have been in that one part, or single tooth, that they wanted so badly?"

"Well, the first thing that springs to mind is what you sort of mentioned earlier, Mr. Kakushidate: gold or silver crowns. You don't see that kind of treatment much these days."

"'Gold crowns, silver crowns'..."

She pronounced it almost like she was listing royal crowns, though that's completely irrelevant—but I see, the idea that the teeth themselves have value. Generally, when we hear 'gold or silver teeth,' we only think of it as treatment, a method of treatment, but they are gold and silver—undeniably valuable.

"Though, I feel like it would be a very small amount. To kill someone for something like that seems—um."

I was trying to say something like 'poor cost performance ratio,' but unfortunately, I couldn't think of any other way to phrase it besides 'poor cost performance ratio,' so I trailed off.

Because after railing against the perpetrator of corpse mutilation so much, thinking about murder in terms of cost performance myself didn't seem very commendable.

"It could have been a bonus on the side. The motive for murder was separate, and since there was no way around it, they took the teeth as well—depending on the number, it might not be such a small amount."

If ten or twenty teeth were all gold or silver, would they fetch a decent price? This hypothesis holds some vague persuasiveness perhaps because the act of extracting gold and silver teeth from corpses for money has occurred historically all over the world—though it's closer to so-called corpse robbing than corpse mutilation.

"Hmm. Rashomon, then. Though Rashomon was about hair."

Ms. Kyoko briefly took her hand away from her cheek to stroke her own completely white hair—a picturesque gesture, but she quickly returned her hand to her cheek.

Rashomon. Come to think of it, that's what the story was about.

At the time, I read it without thinking much—specifically, I didn't read the old woman's actions as corpse mutilation—nor did I particularly empathize with the servant's feelings—perhaps because I read it as an act necessary for survival.

If the culprit in this case also extracted the victim's teeth because they were struggling to eat, would I be able to accept it without feeling revulsion?

Hmm.

Something doesn't sit right.

"That's unlikely. Because they didn't steal the wallet."

"Ah."

"It depends on how much cash was in the wallet—but considering the trouble of converting gold and silver teeth to cash and the risk of leaving a trail, even as a bonus on the side, it's hardly rational."

That's right.

It's irrational.

Even if they had all gold teeth—though if the victim had received such treatment, the investigators probably wouldn't question why all the teeth were missing—it's almost inconceivable that a culprit so dominated by greed as to extract all the teeth would leave the crucial wallet behind.

Forgive my arbitrary image, but I also don't think the wallet of a victim with all gold teeth would be empty—though perhaps with the spread of electronic money these days, that's not necessarily true.

Besides, they were a 'regular office worker.'

Unlike some nouveau riche character in a manga, having all gold teeth isn't realistic in the first place.

"Yes. That level of treatment seems like it wouldn't be covered by insurance."

Ms. Kyoko, who looked like she didn't carry an insurance card, said so—for Ms. Kyoko, who is strict about money, excuse me, sensitive about money, having to bear the full cost of a wisdom tooth extraction must truly feel like a burden.

"However, there's the possibility that the identity as a 'regular office worker' was a fabricated disguise."

"A disguise? You mean they were actually incredibly wealthy or something?"

Like someone who won the lottery but doesn't tell anyone around them? Though apparently, their spending habits tend to change, making it hard to keep hidden—

"No, the possibility that they were actually a spy, for example."

Ms. Kyoko said.

Something that sounded like fiction.

"You know, like in the movies where a spy hides microfilm inside their tooth."

There are—but.

It feels like an old movie somehow.

Like the image of a spy from the spy movies of a bygone era—why is that? Ah, right, because microfilm as a medium itself is now almost nostalgic.

But just because it's nostalgic doesn't mean it's impossible—rather, it could be a blind spot. Yes, like horizontal thinking with established technology in game development—this probably applies to developing tricks in mysteries too.

Since Ms. Kyoko's memory resets daily, in that sense, even if it's an old spy movie trope, it might not be knowledge as old to her as it feels to me—though I called it fiction-like, it's a hypothesis worth serious consideration.

The victim was actually a spy or similar agent, and state secrets were hidden in their tooth—if so, a mysterious motive, neither for money nor revenge, starts to faintly emerge.

"If that's the case, they shouldn't be wasting time interrogating someone like me. It could be a national crisis. They should release me immediately and start planning countermeasures."

"I think they can plan countermeasures just fine while keeping you detained, Mr. Kakushidate. In that case, let's rephrase it as an exchange."

Rephrasing doesn't help me.

I don't want to have an exchange in an interrogation room.

"Well, that's unlikely."

Once again, after suggesting it herself, Ms. Kyoko dismissed the victim-spy theory with a single kick—being dismissed like that makes me feel foolish for having gone along with the reasoning.

"B-Because it's unrealistic?"

"Whether it's realistic or not is uncertain, but the fact that the victim's teeth were roughly extracted concerns me. Such sloppy, murderous work—the kind that might cause death by excessive bleeding if done while alive—it's hard to imagine those are the actions of someone trying to retrieve hidden microfilm."

"I see..."

Whether it's microfilm, or something modern like some kind of chip or external storage, it's easy to imagine that the smaller it gets, the more delicate it becomes—of course, if it's hidden in teeth that regularly bite together, it would have reasonable durability, but whether one would choose to clamp it with pliers and forcibly pull it out is another matter entirely.

Whether the victim was alive or dead, wouldn't they rely on the careful expertise of a specialized dentist? If seeking state secrets held by a spy, the culprit would likely have such connections—

"The same could be said even if what was hidden in the tooth wasn't microfilm, but suicide poison or a small bomb."

It could.

Because the person performing the extraction could be exposed to the poison, or even get caught in the explosion—and there's likely no reason to extract the tooth containing suicide poison or a small bomb anyway.

"No, it's not that there's no reason. If forensics revealed such a thing hidden in a tooth, it could expose the victim as a spy—if the victim was a spy, that is."

"Aha... like cutting the tag off clothes?"

Indeed, I've heard that the fashionable Ms. Kyoko does something similar with her own clothes—an act reportedly done out of caution against personal information being identified from the brand of clothes purchased.

In that case, leaving behind the wallet with ID would have been deliberate—meaning, fake ID. Perhaps it's conceivable that a spy who failed an undercover operation was disposed of by their own side—or could it be that allies extracted the teeth of a spy killed by the 'enemy' to protect secrets?

Indeed, the murderer and the corpse mutilator might not be the same person.

One body, but maybe two incidents.

"But, given that they were actually roughly pulled out, should we assume it was neither poison nor a bomb?"

"If you say the act of pulling teeth itself is rough, no matter how carefully done, you'd be right. Ouch."

Said Ms. Kyoko.

Words that carry weight coming from someone about to have a tooth extracted.

"However, if it were poison or a bomb, one might think they'd use it while being strangled to death. Especially if it was a bomb, they could take their attacker down with them."

Hmm.

Mutual destruction upon death?

Well, the word 'victim' somehow carries the image of being passive, being killed passively, but naturally, facing death, one would resist, and even if unable to resist, their spirit wouldn't necessarily yield—it's natural to try to strike a final blow.

The fact that they didn't do so—didn't self-destruct taking the closely strangling culprit with them, didn't choose to take poison themselves rather than be killed unwillingly by the murderer—suggests that none of the extracted teeth held such devices.

But if the teeth held neither monetary value nor hidden devices, why extract them?

"Perhaps they held a non-monetary value. Like artistically beautiful teeth, for instance."

"Artistically beautiful teeth?"

Saying it aloud sounded like a ridiculous arrangement of words, not teeth, but it didn't seem entirely without value for consideration. No, it could also be called a hypothesis I don't even want to think about—corpse mutilation includes various cases, but this is one of the particularly desecrating ones.

Taking away a part of the body to keep as a collection—

"That sounds like a killer, even without being a former dentist using pliers."

A serial killer, at that.

While all false accusations are fundamentally unpleasant as a basic premise (despite what I said, I really wouldn't want to serve as a scapegoat for a revolutionary either), being framed for the crime of such a serial killer is something I particularly want to avoid.

"I understand how you feel. However, I can also somewhat understand the feeling of wanting to collect teeth."

"Y-You can somewhat understand?"

I thought it was completely incomprehensible?

I thought, how can you say that when you're about to have a tooth pulled, but apparently that wasn't the meaning—it seemed to be a practical point.

"Among those who mutilate corpses and collect body parts, teeth seem relatively easy to manage. After all, they don't rot."

"Ah—but if you say that, don't hair and nails also not rot?"

"Hair seems difficult to handle as a collection. It's long, thin, and light. High risk of loss. Even if collected in bundles, individual differences are hard to discern. You couldn't very well perform DNA tests on each one."

Hmm.

Ms. Kyoko's pure white hair is certainly distinctive, but looking at older people, white-haired individuals themselves aren't rare—nails go without saying, I suppose.

Conversely, teeth show significant individual variation.

Looking at a single tooth might make it difficult to identify whose it is, but if all the teeth are lined up, even an amateur could tell whose teeth they are without needing X-rays—so, a beginner-friendly collection.

No appraisal needed.

If non-rotting is the only criterion, collecting bones is also conceivable, but picking out just the bones from someone you killed is considerably harder than extracting teeth—a gruesome thought, but processes like scraping off the flesh would be essential.

Just imagining it gives me goosebumps.

"So, the culprit is a serial killer—do you read this as meaning they're committing similar crimes elsewhere, where victims have all their teeth pulled out?"

"No, if they were such an indiscriminate killer, they'd likely already be notorious, and it would be strange if the police weren't monitoring them. There's the possibility that this is the first incident, and they're currently committing second and third incidents somewhere—"

That's not good. Not good at all.

Isn't that playing right into the problem of wrongful convictions, 'letting the real criminal go free'—second and third incidents happening while I'm held here like this.

In mystery novels, this sometimes serves to prove my innocence—the syllogism being that since I have an alibi inside the police station when the second crime occurred, I necessarily couldn't have been the perpetrator of the first crime either—but it's not a very satisfying way to have my name cleared.

Here, I really want the master detective to unveil a lightning-flash deduction.

Like biting aluminum foil with a silver filling.

"Besides, there's certainly the possibility that they are neither an indiscriminate nor a serial offender. Perhaps they were a limited collector, strongly fixated only on this victim, who took away all the teeth."

"That fixation sounds less like a collector and more like a stalker..."

In that case, the question arises: would they stop at just the teeth? In the extreme, it seems plausible they might take the entire body home to preserve it. Pickled in formalin—no, perhaps mummified for preservation.

To the point where the term 'corpse mutilation' becomes inadequate.

"However, even with perfect preservation using some kind of embalming, while preservation might be possible, storage seems difficult. It's essentially a life-sized figure, after all."

Ms. Kyoko said, mixing gruesomeness with a hobbyist feel—well, moving house would certainly be tough. They say a basic rule of tidying up is not to buy things you don't know how to dispose of—

"Compared to that, teeth can fit in your pocket. Jingling all the teeth like loose change would surely make it hard to explain during a police stop, but if you think of it as coordinating by carrying different teeth each day—"

Jingling loose change also feels like a somewhat dated concept in the age of electronic money, but ancient cultures aside, well, purely as a collection, the lack of space required is appealing—however, a stalker of that intensity seems even more likely than an indiscriminate killer to have surfaced somehow.

It would be strange if such a dangerous person hadn't become a topic of conversation in some form around the victim—it's a common story for even the most perfect crime using tricks to be exposed through human relationships. Although the idea of suspicion based purely on relationship or position, even without evidence, is a breeding ground for wrongful convictions—

"The dilemma of not being able to kill because you'd be suspected immediately upon discovery of the body—that's quite something. Or perhaps that dilemma was the reason for resorting to the barbaric act of tooth extraction."

"? What do you mean?"

"No, this is a different hypothesis from the collector or stalker theory, but let's say, for example, the culprit was a karateka."

Even if you say 'let's say.'

That's quite a leap. Like a flying kick.

"What happens if they were a karateka?"

"Then, even if the direct cause of death was strangulation, let's say in the process, the culprit punched the victim—even if not fatally, let's say that broke some teeth."

There's a lot of 'let's say.'

Piling hypothesis upon hypothesis—or perhaps it's a leap of logic, like a dental bridge.

Besides, if you get punched in the face by a karateka and only end up with broken teeth, I'd consider that lucky—though if you get killed afterwards, maybe it ends up the same.

"It's not the same, not for the culprit. Because if they saw that broken tooth—or maybe shattered tooth—they'd know the culprit was a user of an incredibly powerful straight punch."

"Ah... so?"

Tooth extraction as evidence concealment?

I see, a karateka's straight punch is an overly obvious, extreme example, but the possibility that during the crime, the victim's tooth was damaged in some way, and because that could lead to identifying the culprit, they had to resort to tooth extraction, even if not a dentist and unwillingly.

Extraction out of necessity.

Extraction done reluctantly, even.

When she suddenly brought up a karateka, it seemed like a wildly off-the-wall hypothesis, but this was actually the most persuasive one so far—for me, personally, that is. Because it's a heinous crime like corpse mutilation, one I can't help but feel revulsion towards, it's easier to accept the idea that it was done reluctantly, out of necessity, rather than out of desire or personal taste—bad taste.

Hearing they did it reluctantly, unwillingly, makes it slightly more palatable—though it probably makes no difference to the victim. If they were punched by a karateka before dying, maybe they'd hate that even more.

"...But, a karateka is unlikely, right? Whether the teeth would break or not, if punched by a karateka before death, the cheek would swell up badly."

Watching Ms. Kyoko constantly stroking her cheek made me realize this, so I said it—not that I ever thought it was a karateka anyway.

"True. A karateka would likely have to cut off the victim's cheek."

"We can't seem to clamp down on the serial killer possibilities—that said, I can't think of a way to break or shatter just the teeth without injuring the face at all."

It's like magic.

It feels like it would require the victim's cooperation, like opening their mouth wide as if receiving dental treatment—under what circumstances, other than dental treatment, would such a situation arise?

"..."

Eating, perhaps?

Feeding someone with an 'aaah,' such a heartwarming relationship is unlikely between the culprit and victim—but what about considering the culprit not as a karateka, but a cook? Perhaps they served an extremely distinctive dish that left traces of smell or color in the oral cavity, killed the victim immediately after, and thus unexpectedly had to extract the teeth...

"That's an interesting deduction I wish I'd thought of myself, but well, in that case, rather than resorting to extraction, they could just brush the teeth for them."

That's right.

If they could obtain pliers, it's unlikely they couldn't obtain a toothbrush.

"However, adopting the heartwarming part about being lovers close enough for 'aaah,' how about this: as a pledge of secret love, they carved each other's initials onto a tooth?"

Even if you ask 'how about this?'

If so, would taking that tooth away be plausible—not as evidence concealment, but as hiding the culprit's identity?

Like taking away a ring or pendant.

Hmm, it feels less persuasive somehow; carving a pledge of love onto a tooth just sounds painful... no matter how secret the love. Depending on the case, it might hurt more than extraction.

Killing the person to whom you pledged such love also doesn't quite sit right.

"Oh my. You're quite pure, Mr. Kakushidate—ouch."

She said it as if being pure was painful, but well, I'll take it as a compliment—certainly, the idea that the culprit had compelling circumstances beyond simple desire seems plausible.

"Indeed. I feel they wouldn't go that far for mere morbid curiosity—evidence concealment, identity concealment... like cutting off a clothing tag..."

Ms. Kyoko placed her other hand on her non-wisdom-tooth cheek, rested her elbows on the table, and seemed to fall into deep thought—for a normal detective, deepening their thoughts like this would be desirable, but for Ms. Kyoko, deep thought is a bad sign.

She's at her best when rapidly firing off exhaustive deduction-style guesses one after another—perhaps trying to deduce amidst tooth pain means she can't perform at her best.

"Ms. Kyoko, are you okay for time?"

"Time?"

Ms. Kyoko reacted sensitively to that word, but no, I wasn't smugly trying to catch her out on her 'ten minutes sounds about right' statement—what I was concerned about here was the dentist's time.

If her appointment time was approaching, I wouldn't mind letting her prioritize that—the interrogation hasn't been too harsh so far, anyway.

Spending the night in a holding cell is usual for me.

"You know, your wisdom tooth appointment—"

As I said this, I rolled up the sleeve of my right arm, but oops, careful. That was a careless move—the fact that Ms. Kyoko uses her bare skin as a memo pad was supposed to be a professional secret.

The fact that 'I am Kyoko Okitegami. Detective. My memory resets every day' is handwritten on her left arm isn't a trademark, but literally a provision for emergencies, and my knowing it is something like a coincidence due to being a regular client—if she found out I knew such a secret through some misunderstanding, she might stop helping me.

I almost said something unnecessary out of misplaced concern—firstly, the idea that the dentist's appointment time would be written on her right arm was just my own guess anyway.

This is why I'm False Accusations Kid.

"What did you just say?"

And then.

At that moment, Ms. Kyoko, for the first time today, stopped stroking her cheek—as if, for an instant, she forgot the tooth pain.

"Rather—what did you just do?"

"Ah, umm."

Damn, did just rolling up my right sleeve reveal that I know about the Forgetful Detective's memo system? Just from rolling up my sleeve?

If so, she's too much of a detective.

My thinking she seemed off her game because of the toothache was a complete misunderstanding—pity that her deductive power was demonstrated on something unrelated to the case.

However, that too was my misunderstanding.

It was true that Ms. Kyoko reacted sharply to my sleeve-rolling, but what she reached was, ultimately, the truth of the corpse mutilation—huh? From my sleeve-rolling?

"Yes. I knew the truth of this case from the very beginn-ouch ouch ouch."

...Her signature line didn't quite land.

5

Once you reach the truth, it's common to find you'd been hovering around its vicinity all along, but this time that feeling was particularly strong—it seems my revulsion towards corpse mutilation clouded my judgment, but the deduction that came up relatively early, 'to hide the identity,' was almost a passing grade.

A gnawing frustration, really.

Mind you, it was to hide the identity of the perpetrator, not the victim—which also came up towards the end of the exhaustive reasoning, and that too was almost the truth.

But what came closest to the truth was when I, considering the seemingly fanciful victim-spy theory with a bomb hidden in a tooth, thought it natural that the victim wouldn't just passively accept their fate but would try to strike a final blow.

What if it wasn't one blow?

What if it was one tooth—no, twenty-eight to thirty-two teeth?

In short, what if, while being strangled with a rope and about to be killed, they put up strong resistance—and bit the culprit's hand or arm?

A clear bite mark would be left on that arm.

Perhaps far clearer than an X-ray stored at a dentist's office—if matched, it would undoubtedly be proof of the crime, stamped like a seal.

That's why it had to be destroyed.

The 'weapon' that injured their own arm, the victim's teeth, had to be destroyed—I'm not saying this randomly.

I too had intended to place considerable importance on the fact that the victim's teeth were extracted particularly roughly—but ultimately, I had only interpreted it as 'the culprit is not a dentist.'

"It's possible they couldn't extract them properly because their dominant arm was injured—even if the opposite arm supporting the victim's jaw was bitten, it would surely be a difficult task."

Because it's like performing an extraction with one hand.

Ms. Kyoko said, deeply reflecting.

Then, carefully making me roll up my right sleeve once more,

"Conversely, Mr. Kakushidate, since your arms are uninjured, you are removed from the suspect list."

She continued—indeed, my arms bear neither memos nor bite marks or scars. My only asset is my health—to think that would prove my innocence.

"Ah, so conversely speaking, the person with bite marks on one or both arms is the culprit, right? Of course, they're probably hiding it with gloves or long sleeves... but the fact that they went to such lengths to destroy the 'evidence' probably means such a person is among the victim's acquaintances, so from here on it should be easy to solve just by making people roll up their sleeves—"

"Well, I wouldn't know about that. Thanks to the ample time Mr. Kakushidate bought them, you see."

Ms. Kyoko said while getting ready to leave—that is, while reluctantly preparing to head to the dentist. Despite being the fastest detective, she seemed, somehow, to be preparing sluggishly. Since identifying the culprit wasn't part of her job this time, she spoke perhaps casually, irresponsibly.

"Not content with just hiding it under gloves or long sleeves—they might have already destroyed the evidence of their own 'handiwork' as well, you know."

"..."

Befitting her irresponsibility, it was a gruesome deduction, akin to corpse mutilation itself, but perhaps the culprit in this case would make such a decision.

Unlike the victim, they still had teeth to grit.

Kyoko Okitegami's Wisdom Tooth—Forgotten

第三証

掟上今日子の船　酔い

Ch 3: Kyoko Okitegami’s Seasickness

1

"P—Please, let me call a detective!"

Now, the state of mind I (Yakusuke Kakushidate) am in when I shout this isn't uniform depending on the situation or the alleged crime, as I've already mentioned, but of course, the reactions of those on the receiving end of this killer word also vary, and are not uniform. I chant it like a magic spell that works on any opponent, but this is simply because I don't have many tricks up my sleeve.

That said, there are patterns.

Precisely because it's not uniform, categorization is possible.

The ones I shout it at most often are (as most would guess) police officers—after all, the people who arrest me, take me in for voluntary questioning, stop and question me on the street, or interrogate me, asking me things they're asking everyone, are basically police personnel, so it's only natural. They're the ones who end up hearing my spell the most, and in a sense, they're also the ones who properly listen to my spell—because the right to remain silent, the right not to give testimony disadvantageous to oneself in court, the right to call a lawyer, and the right to call a detective are recognized for everyone.

Given that, you might think the next most likely candidates would be prosecutors, but surprisingly, that's not the case—by the time I'm arrested by the police, or even if not arrested, about to have my case sent to the prosecutors, unless there are extremely pressing circumstances, or I'm placed in a special environment, I typically call a detective to, so to speak, clear me of the false accusations draped upon me. Therefore, opportunities for me—Yakusuke Kakushidate—to meet prosecutors are actually quite rare.

I settle things before the situation progresses that far.

I want to settle them.

That's why I haven't experienced the procedures after being sent to the prosecutors very much, and I'm not in a position to judge whether my few experiences are typical or not—well, that said, like the police, they are a public investigative body, so there isn't a huge difference in how I respond or in the nuance of the magic spell I chant.

Following that line of thought, further down the line—cases where I'm falsely accused by a judge—are also mostly the same. However, once it gets to that point, it surpasses false accusation and becomes a misjudgment, so the severity of my situation rises to the maximum

level. If there were a higher-level incantation for the killer phrase, I'd want to chant that—but since there isn't, I just tremble on the witness stand, under oath, calling for a detective.

A pattern that sends more shivers down my spine than the witness stand is when I'm detained by the military—in a broad sense, that's probably also an arrest, but the tension of being taken prisoner is beyond maximum, with a distinct difference or two. In Japan, this means being detained by the Self-Defense Forces, but someone like me naturally has experience being captured by foreign armies, even on the front lines—chanting a magic spell at someone who might not understand the language felt like a test of courage.

Well, even so, armies have their own discipline, and since prisoner abuse is forbidden, at least on paper, depending on negotiations, it's not impossible to properly call a detective—where there's an organization, rules emerge.

If you follow the rules, there's a way out of a tight spot.

In that sense, the most difficult opponent—that is, the situation where even I find it hardest to call a detective—is, paradoxically, when the one who arrested me is a detective themselves.

Technically, even someone not from a public institution can make a citizen's arrest if it's during the commission of a crime, and moreover, in closed circles like a 'snowy mountain villa' or a 'desert island,' the 'master detective' often becomes a 'small police station'—they casually suggest things like locking the prime suspect in a windowless room.

In the worst case, this can lead to a new locked-room murder, so from the perspective of the falsely accused, it means detectives can be hit or miss.

Sadly, it's by no means a rare case for the master detective, who should be the last hope for victims of false accusations, to be the one pinning the false charge—but even so, one must not despair of master detectives there.

Rather, just as it's an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, you must call a detective for a detective—of course, they'll say, 'Now, now, with me here, surely there's no need to call another detective,' but you mustn't yield to such territoriality. You can't bear a false accusation just to protect a detective's pride—whether facing a master detective or an amateur detective, you call a detective no matter what.

In a way, to protect the detective's pride.

As someone who loves detectives—detective novels—I won't let a detective create a false accusation.

If that's the worst-case scenario, then the situation I'm in this time is, well, let's say middling, or rather, different from usual, but something I could probably manage depending on how I handle it.

Even though I might seem to just shout the same line the same way, I suppose I still need ingenuity appropriate to the situation—this time, the one who arrested me was the captain of an undersea exploration vessel.

It's a little-known piece of trivia, but the power of arrest aboard vessels sailing the world's seas rests with the ship's captain—of course, this itself is a rule based on law, so I have no objection, but the problem is that the situation where the captain's arrest power arises is the world's seas.

Not an isolated island in the distant sea, but an isolated ship in the distant sea.

If it were an airplane, it wouldn't be long, likely landing at some airport in a few hours, but in a situation surrounded by azure sea, how on earth am I supposed to call a detective? In the old days, they said "hell is just one plank away," but surely they wouldn't make me walk blindfolded on a thin plank extending from the deck—

2

"Nice to meet you. I am Kyoko Okitegami, the detective."

That, too, was her usual key phrase, but while it looks the same when written down, in reality, it had much more vibrato—so much vibrato, you could even say it had a Doppler effect.

Given the situation, speaking in ship terms, it resonated like a ship's whistle before departure—however, Ms. Kyoko hadn't pulled alongside the exploration vessel where I was captive, leaning out of a speedboat.

She arrived by helicopter.

From a high-speed helicopter, the kind you might see used by the military, she lowered a steel ladder, her white hair and fashionable outfit—statistically, Ms. Kyoko often wears long skirts, but this time, understandably, she wore pants—fluttering with all their might as she descended onto the deck of the 'isolated ship in the distant sea'.

The swiftest detective.

It was an entrance fitting for her, you could say—in terms of simple speed, it might have been faster if she'd come in a fighter jet, but a fighter jet probably can't hover.

The exploration vessel isn't an aircraft carrier.

If only it had a heliport, Ms. Kyoko wouldn't have had to take such a pointless risk, but nevertheless, even for me, a regular client of the Forgetful Detective, this impressively bold entrance scene, almost unlike any I could recall, seemed to have put Ms. Kyoko herself in high spirits.

"You must be the client, Mr. Yakusuke Kakushidate. Wow, thank you very much. You've given me a valuable experience, though I'll forget it by tomorrow. I'd like to give you my business card, but in this strong wind, it seems better to refrain."

As if in replacement, Ms. Kyoko offered her hand for a shake—the manner of a Western-style master detective, not Japanese style.

I accepted.

Shaking hands on a ship feels almost like signing a treaty, though.

Well, I was taken aback, but at the same time, relieved—it seemed the captain had listened to my assertion of my legitimate right when I shouted, 'Please let me call a detective!'

Though surely even the captain hadn't expected a master detective to make such a dynamic entrance.

"Right. I'll solve any case in a day. It took about half a day one way or another to charter the helicopter. Let's wrap this up, like a propeller."

Having the case resolution "wrapped up" quickly isn't necessarily helpful, but—then something occurred to me.

Her dynamic, action-movie-like entrance took my breath away, but this is reality—for instance, I've heard a plausible urban legend that when you're rescued from a mountain disaster, the cost of the helicopter dispatched for the rescue is billed to the person rescued.

In reality, public institutions might cover it, or insurance might pay, but ending up paying a hefty fee on top of being stranded felt like adding insult to injury—but honestly, not just helicopters, it's natural that when something moves somewhere, corresponding costs are incurred.

So, in this case, the helicopter cost—and the pilot's fee—who pays for that?

This necessary expense...

Just now, Ms. Kyoko smiled and offered me her hand, saying, 'Wow, thank you very much,' but...

"Um, Ms. Kyoko—"

"So? I understand it's a locked-room murder case?"

The swiftest detective had already moved on to the next topic.

Faster than the ship, faster than the helicopter.

3

How the Forgetful Detective arrived, that is, boarded, was described earlier, but as for how I, Yakusuke Kakushidate, the False Accusations King, came to be on the exploration vessel—or rather, ended up stuck on it—it was simply work.

I'm a hard worker.

My routine as a working member of society is to get fired from my job each time I'm falsely accused, have the detective I called clear my name, and then diligently find the next job. This time, my place of employment just happened to be an exploration vessel.

Though, honestly, the moment I heard "ship," I had a bad feeling.

It was even beyond a feeling, more like a realization based on experience.

You don't even need to go back as far as Agatha Christie; ships tend to become settings for mysteries for one reason or another—but on the other hand, for someone like me, who experientially spends a third of the year in a holding cell, I didn't have the luxury of being picky about jobs.

It's a personal job ice age for me.

I'm constantly riding an icebreaker.

For someone in my position, being a crew member on an exploration vessel was probably rather fortunate. I even heard appealing stories, like working full-time for six months means you can take the remaining six months as vacation—even if I spend a third of the year incarcerated, I'd still have about two months of freedom. Come to think of it, since the Age of Discovery, ships were apparently valued as 'workplaces with no escape,' but... however, in an 'inescapable workplace,' incidents almost inevitably occur.

They are bound to happen.

That tradition is carried on even in the confined space training for astronauts, but... what occurred this time was a locked-room murder in an enclosed space.

In old-fashioned terms, would this be a double locked room?

"The scene is this cabin here. One of the crew members was stabbed to death here—with a so-called corkscrew."

The thing also called a corkscrew opener.

It's not often chosen as a murder weapon, but perhaps because of that, it highlights the heinousness of the crime—at least, I wouldn't want to die by having a corkscrew stabbed into my carotid artery.

I don't want to die in any way, but if I absolutely had to, I'd want to choose the easiest way possible.

I'd also like to avoid a bizarre way of dying.

Though I wouldn't say being suspected is better.

"Hmm... which means... the cause of death... due to excessive bleeding... exsanguination... or perhaps... shock death... is likely what happened."

Ms. Kyoko stated the obvious—speaking her thoughts as they come is also part of the Forgetful Detective's exhaustive deduction style, but her tone was unusually slow for the swiftest detective.

Slow and lacking energy.

"A-Are you alright? Ms. Kyoko."

"Don't mind me... it won't interfere with my reasoning."

Ms. Kyoko showed her professionalism here, but as the client, I couldn't take her words at face value. Not just face value, her face itself had turned deathly pale—paler even than her trademark all-white hair.

Clearly, her physical condition was off.

"Y-You're seasick, aren't you—"

"I am not."

Her denial was swift.

But still, her trying to act tough doesn't help—not like I can be of any help either; it took me time to get used to it too.

"This sea area is particularly rough, you know. If you want to lie down, please don't push yourself—"

Ms. Kyoko seems to have infinite stamina, but that's likely stamina suited for short sprints; the parameters of her delicate body probably aren't that high—having her semicircular canals, right next to her grey matter, continuously tossed left and right like this would naturally cause her performance to drop.

Plummet, even.

I felt reassured when she made her dashing entrance via high-speed helicopter, but thinking back, maybe she was already feeling unwell then.

Was that the reason for her high spirits?

The shaking of a helicopter and the rocking of a ship must be different, though—

"Hmm... there's absolutely nothing wrong with my health, but... lying down might be a good idea... for you, Mr. Kakushidate."

What's that supposed to mean, "for me"?

She shouldn't know anything about me, having just met me—I assumed she'd move to some other cabin to rest, but Ms. Kyoko lay down on the floor of the cabin, the scene of the murder.

Following the instructions of the captain, who holds police authority, the body had already been moved to a cold storage room (not a morgue), and the blood spatters had also been cleaned up nicely (after taking photos, of course), but still, lying down in her stylish clothes right where a dead body had been until just moments ago was extraordinary.

"Phew. I feel a bit better now."

'Though I was fine to begin with,' added Ms. Kyoko.

In fact, maybe it was just my imagination, but her complexion looked calmer—she had looked more like a corpse than the actual corpse, yet replicating the corpse seemed to restore her; she truly felt like a born master detective.

On a bed, maybe, but lying directly on the floor seemed like it would make you feel the ship's rocking even more directly... well, perhaps simply surrendering yourself to the rocking is one way to avoid seasickness.

I could offer her the seasickness medicine kept on board, but the Forgetful Detective, whose memory resets every time she sleeps, generally doesn't mix well with medication.

Seasickness pills probably aren't simple anesthetics, but there's a risk that if her mind stabilizes due to the drug's effect, she might just fall asleep—waking up to find herself inside an exploration vessel would be quite the state of amnesia.

In that case, as long as she says she's okay, perhaps I shouldn't interfere unnecessarily or impose a 'client stop'... I'm worried about Ms. Kyoko's health as she spins around, but I'm just as worried about my own state of false accusation.

Thanks to the understanding captain's arrangement regarding human rights, I'm allowed to freely attend to the detective like this, but I'm still the prime suspect. If this takes too long, I might be judged by the rules of the men of the sea.

"'Men of the sea,' you say. Come to think of it, there was a time when ships were off-limits to women, wasn't there? Well, not just ships. What was it again, because the sea god gets jealous, was it?"

I feel like that was about mountains, at least in Japanese folklore.

That said, it might have been to avoid trouble between men and women in a confined space—though I speak of it like ancient history, it's still one of the leading motives for murder even today.

Though I casually said 'men of the sea,' it's a formal expression like 'sportsman' or 'fireman'; it's not like only men are aboard this ship equipped with the latest modern technology—however, that doesn't mean we can jump to the conclusion that the victim was killed due to trouble between the sexes.

Even for the swiftest detective.

Swiftness must not become haste.

"By the way, Mr. Kakushidate. You referred to this as the 'scene' earlier, but how far has this 'scene' moved since the time the incident occurred?"

A scene moving is an odd expression, but when the location is a ship, it's an issue that must be considered—even if anchored, unless the anchor is dropped, it will naturally drift with the waves.

"We stopped the engines after the murder was discovered, but well, it hasn't stayed still."

"Hmm. With the room cleaned as well, the preservation of the scene is worse than any I've seen in the past."

'Though I've forgotten the past,' the Forgetful Detective didn't forget to add—regarding the scene moving, that's one thing, but regarding the room cleaning, evidence might have been lost, so I want to state that I did voice my objection to the captain's decision.

However, I understand the captain's point of view.

In the confined space of a ship, leaving a dead body and blood spatters around and risking the spread of some infectious disease is scarier—more to be wary of than the murderer (from the captain's perspective, already practically captured), he must have judged.

Personally, I can't agree, but it's not an incomprehensible way of thinking, and 'the captain's orders are absolute'—although I voiced my dissent, I followed the instructions afterward, and, truth be told, it was I who cleaned the cabin.

My opposition amounts to that much.

Easier to sway than a ship.

"Hmm. Well, deciding whether a murderer or an infectious disease is scarier is a difficult point. If you consider the potential spread of harm, then of course, an infectious disease is scarier, but a murderer comes to kill with intent."

Ms. Kyoko put into clear words the vague unease I had been feeling—truly a master detective.

Maybe not resisting and just lying down, letting the rocking carry her, is really effective against seasickness—perhaps it's like synchronizing your body's tilt with the driver's when dealing with carsickness.

"However, having the evidence wiped away is problematic. For that point alone, it's unavoidable that you are suspected, Mr. Kakushidate."

Lying still like a corpse, eyes calmly closed, Ms. Kyoko—she's absolutely right. From my perspective, I was merely following orders, but 'just following orders' doesn't automatically mean innocence.

The Stanford Prison Experiment, or the Milgram Experiment... 'just following orders' can, in fact, be a component constituting a crime. However, in this case, the captain, who is at the top of the chain of command, has investigative authority, so trying to judge me for following his orders is somewhat unreasonable.

It's not insubordination, it's a Catch-22.

"That's true. Then it's not because you destroyed evidence that you're suspected, Mr. Kakushidate."

"No. It's not like I cleaned it up all by myself, after all."

I wasn't the only part-timer handyman hired on this exploration vessel—especially, the process of moving the corpse with the corkscrew stuck in it to the cold storage room, was absolutely impossible for one person, both physically and psychologically.

Yet, I alone am suspected and ended up calling a detective, for a specific reason.

"A reason. Is it because you are the culprit, Mr. Kakushidate?"

"No. That kind of thinking is what creates false accusations."

I offer unnecessary lecturing.

I mentioned it's hardest to call a detective when suspected by one, but come to think of it, Ms. Kyoko almost always tends to suspect me once during the course of an investigation.

It could be called an inevitability of exhaustive deduction, but in that sense, she's quite a risky detective—if it weren't for her overwhelming swiftness that more than compensates, she might be a difficult detective for the False Accusations King to hire.

Well, there aren't many detectives who would rush out to an isolated ship, so it's not like I have much choice, though.

Do I have neither freedom of occupational choice nor freedom of detective choice?

"Oh? Well, as you say, being suspected by the captain for cleaning the scene under his orders does seem rather unreasonable."

More than just rather.

Though it happens often enough in the world.

"Then why are you currently considered the culprit, Mr. Kakushidate?"

"Because the scene was a locked room. That said, it was a simple locked room, just the door locked—as you can see, it's an inside cabin with no windows, and the only element constituting the locked room is the thumbturn lock on the entrance."

"I see. So, you, Mr. Kakushidate, were the only one on this ship who possessed the lock-picking skills to open that thumbturn lock."

"Exactly, only I—wait, why me? I can't do that, picking locks."

I can't afford to give a confession through this kind of comedic back-and-forth. This, too, no joke, happens often enough in the world—people tend to confess in the heat of the moment and end up in irreversible situations.

The vibe of the interrogation room.

A chilling phrase.

"In that case, why are you suspected, Mr. Kakushidate? Was there some deep-seated conflict between you and the victim?"

"No, I'd barely even spoken to him."

"Barely? Which means you had spoken a little?"

She's really pressing, the master detective.

I only said that as a precaution; as far as I remember, I hadn't spoken to him—yet the reason I'm suspected is.

"To reiterate, it was just—or rather, simply a locked room secured by an ordinary key. It can be opened with a master key, and it's a locked room that can be created if you have a master key."

"I suppose so. If I may say something indiscreet, from a detective's perspective, it's not a very fascinating locked room."

Indiscreet indeed, but well, she's probably right. That said, for the False Accusations King, whether it's a simple locked room or a complex one, it's still a matter of grave concern.

Painfully pressing.

"I'm the handyman—I'm hired on this ship as the go-to guy for anything, you see."

Should I say, was hired?

But I haven't been fired yet. Just treated as the culprit—though even if my name is cleared, it's doubtful whether the employment relationship will continue in the subsequent sea areas.

Job hunting again, huh.

My heart feels heavy. Like ballast.

"Specifically, my main duty involved physical security, and concretely, I was entrusted with managing the master keys."

"...For a newly arrived handyman, you were assigned quite an important role."

Once again, Ms. Kyoko directs a look of suspicion at me. No, regarding this, even someone who isn't a master detective would find it suspicious—that's precisely why I'm the prime suspect like this.

Even I thought it was a job with too much responsibility, and if I could choose, I would have preferred to handle a different task.

"Just in case, I asked the captain why me, maybe on the first day."

"Maybe the first day? That's a vague statement."

Vague it may be, but calling it a statement implies a certain direction.

Speaking of ships, should I call it her bearing... rather fitting for how unbearable this feels?

"It was the first day. The answer I got was this—he wanted to avoid the danger of crew members getting locked in their rooms, so he wanted the master keys managed by someone trustworthy."

In reality, something far worse than being locked in happened—Ms. Kyoko frowned at the word 'trustworthy'.

Please don't frown.

No, it's not like I pride myself on being an exceptionally virtuous person. But, in fact, it surprisingly wasn't the first time I'd received such a 'misunderstanding'.

"I told him frankly during the interview that I was job hunting immediately after having a false accusation cleared. It seems he deemed me undoubtedly trustworthy because my innocence had been cleared."

It seems he judged that since my innocence was publicly proven, this fine young man Yakusuke Kakushidate was beyond doubt pure and upright—no matter how clearly the detective I called proved my innocence, it often happens that people continue to suspect, 'But maybe he's really the true culprit, isn't he?', so honestly, being told that doesn't make me unhappy, but being assigned excessive responsibilities for that reason feels a bit off.

Having a false accusation cleared or innocence proven doesn't guarantee my character or law-abiding spirit, so having the paradox 'trustworthy precisely because he's the False Accusations King' applied feels like an overestimation—well, the very fact that I accepted the job without rejecting such an assessment, which is as much a misunderstanding as a false accusation, makes it clear that I am not a person of high character.

I've worked as a caddy at a golf course, but unfortunately, I haven't been able to thoroughly maintain the fair play spirit like the players.

Naturally, I got fired under false pretenses that time too.

That's why, when something like this happens, I end up being suspected—though, to his credit, the captain didn't blatantly reverse his stance just because an incident occurred. He let me call a detective like this, and didn't ironically lock me in the cabin... but excessive trust leads to pain when it's betrayed, so I really should have properly denied it.

Being trusted arbitrarily and then having them act betrayed is quite taxing, but on the other hand, maybe the style of resolving unfavorable misunderstandings by any means necessary while readily accepting convenient ones naturally earns you a proper backlash.

Well, surely the victim wasn't killed as my karmic backlash—shouldering excessive responsibility there is also quite a stretch.

It's neither self-inflicted misfortune nor bad karma.

It's just someone else's crime.

"Not necessarily, Mr. Kakushidate."

"Eh?"

My fate, you mean?

That's an uncharacteristic line for Ms. Kyoko, who embodies rationalism—though being a master detective means she's not a rationalist in the strictest sense, does she seriously think my lack of prudence led to this situation?

"No, what's not necessarily true isn't that—it's that whether it's someone's crime has not yet been proven."

Not just someone's crime.

'It might be an innocent accident'—Ms. Kyoko said.

4

"An accident? No, no, that's impossible."

I retorted instantly—thinking back, that was a very typical crowd reaction in a mystery reveal scene—but I didn't just say it reflexively or without grounds.

A knife, I could understand.

A fork might be possible.

Maybe even a spoon, if handled recklessly, could unintentionally become a deadly weapon through negligence—but a corkscrew. Among all cutlery, its structure seems perhaps the least likely to be mishandled—

"Oh, you think so?"

"Yes. Because, no matter how you use it, isn't it designed so you grip the handle tightly with your whole palm—and, how should I put it, not vertically gripping a part like a knife? You grip almost the whole thing from above, so it's hard to imagine it slipping out due to misjudging force."

Of course, since humans are involved, you can't say accidents are completely impossible—it's entirely conceivable that your hand might slip while trying to pull a cork, and you stab your other hand.

But stabbing the carotid artery—that's just too absurd.

It's above the shoulders, you know?

"Not necessarily. You know how corkscrews have that twisty, coil-like shape?"

"'Coil'-like?"

"Not the town in Ayrshire."

"Ah, you mean Coylton."

Why would the Forgetful Detective know place names in Scotland? Since she forgets newly acquired knowledge, this must be something she knew originally—or perhaps the high-speed helicopter took off from somewhere near there.

Anyway, well.

If she says it's like a coil, it's like a coil.

A coiled spring.

Though I don't know why 'Coylton' ever got that name, surely it's not related.

"Eh? So, you're saying a corkscrew dropped on the floor landed at just the right angle, bounced up like a trampoline, and stabbed the victim right in the neck?"

"Is that impossible?"

"It seems impossible."

Not just the neck, it probably wouldn't even hit a sock.

Let alone the neck area, it wouldn't even bounce up to the ankle—if you applied extreme pressure, it might physically act like a spring, but even someone strong like me can't compress the tip(?) of a corkscrew.

By the way, my strength is just for show.

My physique is basically all bark and no bite.

"Moreover, for a corkscrew simply dropped on the ground to bounce up to an adult's neck... it's not a superball."

"Yes. Probably not. Although, if you say that, a knife wouldn't bounce up either."

Ms. Kyoko said something that seemed to negate her own reasoning—that's true, but still, a knife somehow feels more likely to bounce up under certain circumstances. Is it a matter of shape, or weight—anyway, a fatal accident with a corkscrew seems unlikely. At least, hard to conceive.

"Indeed. If this were an ordinary locked room."

"?"

"The point is, this is a 'moving locked room'—more accurately, perhaps a 'rocking locked room'."

Ms. Kyoko said this while still lying down—that is, while surrendering herself to the ship's rocking.

"Or perhaps, a 'stormy locked room'."

'You mentioned this sea area is particularly rough—how severe was the rocking on the night of the incident?'

"Wasn't it so chaotic that everything in the room was thrown about? So much so that cleaning was necessary."

"..."

It was indeed a severe storm.

Frankly, the word 'storm' itself sounds far too contained for such chaos—still, there's no doubt the incident occurred amidst that kind of havoc.

That's precisely why I perceived it as a crime committed under the cover of confusion—

"You said an accident is hard to conceive, but for example, if you put a person and a corkscrew together in a bartender's shaker and shook it violently, is it still hard to conceive that its tip might stab the neck?"

"...Well, no."

The premise of putting a person and a corkscrew together in a shaker is hard to conceive in the first place, but accepting that purely as a premise—and the fact that a shaker comes up when talking about a corkscrew is also hard to swallow—fitting for talk about drinks—if I may speak from the position of having experienced the same severe storm on the same ship, then yes, it's not entirely inconceivable.

Experientially, it felt like there was no front or back, left or right, up or down; it was a miracle the ship didn't capsize—to prepare for such situations, cabins are usually designed so luggage cannot be placed higher than head level, but that likely doesn't apply to small items.

I hear that even on spaceships, individual items can be secured to tables and such—though even I haven't worked part-time as an astronaut—conversely, this implies that such accidents are anticipated in zero-gravity conditions.

"...Even so, that's an extremely low probability, isn't it? Isn't the percentage something like one-hundredth of the possibility that a person with malicious intent killed the victim with a corkscrew and constructed a locked room by some means? In fact, neither I, nor the other crew members, nor of course the captain, who experienced the same rocking, suffered such a fate."

"It's precisely because it's low probability that no one else suffered such a fate. Rather, because many people simultaneously encountered the same situation, isn't it that someone among them probabilistically met with disaster?"

I see, low probability means unlikely to happen, not impossible—it sounds like something from a boys manga, but it's not zero.

The more trials, the higher the likelihood of it occurring—it leaps up like a spring. No matter how low the probability, people who win first prize in the lottery certainly exist, and as is often said colloquially, you can't win the lottery if you don't buy a ticket.

Or perhaps, it's like saying that for me, who has no habit of drinking wine as a matter of fact, the probability of having an accident with a corkscrew is zero. Conversely, if a ship carrying a large crew encounters a severe storm, it's plausible that one person might be struck by an extremely bizarre and tragic event—an 'accident' that can only be described as misfortune.

"..."

"Oh my. What's wrong? I expected a bit more rebuttal."

"No, well... it's not that I don't have thoughts, but rather, I've become convinced."

In detective novels, developments where accidental elements contribute unexpectedly to a crime scene, creating a bizarre murder scene—where a complex trick happens to work out by chance—might seem unrealistic from a reality perspective, but if many people experienced the same thing simultaneously, then that one instance occurring isn't abnormal or miraculous, perhaps it's precisely reality.

To put it in grand terms, it's akin to the emergence of life on Earth, or the evolution of that life. It's precisely because the 'laboratory' is on a cosmic scale that these become 'ordinary' phenomena that can quite realistically occur.

"Besides, more than being convinced, I'm relieved. Because this solves 'the other locked room' too."

"What did you just say?"

5

Due perhaps to prioritizing swiftness, the Forgetful Detective's reasoning process tends to lack thorough explanation, and consequently, my situational explanations also tend to be minimal, but the excuse for why the crew member found dead in the locked room was judged to be 'murder' rather than 'accidental death'—or rather, why it was assumed to be murder—should indeed have been stated at the beginning.

This is the client's blunder, not the detective's.

I messed up.

Indeed, it makes perfect sense why Ms. Kyoko consistently adheres to 'clients lie' and doubts every single word I say—I didn't intend to lie, but if I omit crucial information, the result isn't much different from being a liar.

'What did you just say?'

This is also a catchphrase of Ms. Kyoko's that I hear often, but this is the first time it's been used this way—usually it's used leading into the final reveal, but if it becomes a bridge between chapters, isn't it just a normal phrase?

It doesn't land decisively.

"So, precisely because a locked-room murder had already occurred, following that flow, this case was accepted as the second murder? That's problematic, Mr. Kakushidate. You need to tell me things like that first."

Ms. Kyoko grimaced more with annoyance than with being troubled—perhaps her business smile crumbled because she thought she could leave this rocking ship now.

Does she intend to ride the helicopter back too?

On my necessary expense budget.

"Sorry, I just inadvertently..."

"Inadvertently?"

"In that other case, I wasn't a suspect, so I arbitrarily—or rather, unconsciously—judged it to be unrelated."

"Unrelated?—On the contrary, it's highly related. Just when I unveiled the reasoning that even one seemingly mysterious locked-room murder isn't strange because many people encountered the same severe storm, you reveal such a fact afterward. If two occurred, that's a bit strange, isn't it?"

It might be more than just a bit strange.

The foundation of the reasoning collapses.

"I'll have no choice but to charge a penalty fee."

"I-Is it that serious?"

"However, I can't just ignore that. The fact that you weren't a suspect in that other case... normally, if a second incident occurs, isn't it inferred that the culprit is the same as the first incident?"

Of course, some culprits (or mystery writers) use that assumption to their advantage, but well, that's the standard—especially when the target is this False Accusations King. The fact that just because I became a suspect in the second case, I wasn't violently, or perhaps logically, assumed to be the culprit in the first case as well, might even be called an abnormal situation.

It feels almost illogical.

But, there's a reason for that.

A solid reason why even the most suspicious person—be it police, detective, or captain—cannot treat me as the culprit, specifically regarding the first incident.

"After all, it's a locked-room murder case that seems to have occurred before I was even born."

"Huh?"

"And the scene is a sunken ship."

Regardless of its past.

It is now a locked room that does not move—difficult even to move it.

"To begin with, what this exploration vessel was exploring was the undersea environment, soil, things like that—apparently, but by chance, during the survey activities, it discovered a sunken ship."

What kind of ship—is unknown.

It's unclear which country's ship it was, and depending on the era, it's uncertain if that country even still exists. If it were a sunken ship exploration vessel, it would be a major achievement, but since it's not at all, this was a troublesome matter—more troublesome than my name of 'Yakusuke.'

It's like digging the ground for construction and discovering ancient ruins.

And, truth be told, the one who discovered that ship was the crew member who became the victim of the 'second locked room'—no, not truth be told, it's not like I was hiding it.

"Oh ho. That's interesting. That the victim who died here was a diver."

"Ah, no. That's not it. Even though it's called undersea exploration, nowadays it's done with drones."

" 'Doroon'?"

Ms. Kyoko folded her hands in front of her chest—or rather, formed a sign by raising both index fingers.

That's 'doron' (ninja disappearing puff).

"Um... it's a machine, or maybe a robot."

"Ah. You mean a manipulator?"

Slightly different.

And on top of that, slightly outdated.

However, the understanding is correct—this is perhaps where the Forgetful Detective shines(?).

"It's equipped with sophisticated cameras, so you can know the state of the seabed as if held in one's hand. Like a manipulator—or perhaps, like seeing it firsthand—well, regardless, it's a major discovery. The captain probably had a grim face, but I understand wanting to raise a toast as the discoverer."

Since he couldn't raise a toast openly, perhaps the flow was that he wanted to secretly open a bottle of wine alone in his cabin—if that led to 'accidental death,' it's a real twist of fate.

Or maybe just 'twist of skate', in fish terms?

"Hmm. Is it such a major discovery worthy of a toast? No, it's fine to toast, but delaying the work would affect not just the captain, but the entire crew, wouldn't it? It's not like his name will go down in history for it."

"Because gold bars were also discovered."

"Gold bars!?"

Thump, Ms. Kyoko sat bolt upright.

What a reaction.

What happened to the seasickness?

"Excuse me. I'm the type of detective whose tension rises when I hear about gold bars."

"Isn't that just your personality showing?"

Or her true nature.

Also known as the plating coming off—gold plating.

"If gold bars were discovered, then of course it's a party. The captain wouldn't have a bitter face either. He'd have a beaming face."

"That depends on where they were discovered."

"In the sunken ship, right?"

"Precisely, in a room within the sunken ship—in a locked room within the sunken ship."

Moreover, next to the gold bars.

Lay a dead body.

6

"It was apparently a skeleton, but of course, it likely wasn't a skeleton from the start—it should be considered to have skeletonized over a long life underwater."

"Not life, surely."

"Right. Death."

Fortunately or unfortunately.

No, that's definitely unfortunate, but because it was skeletonized, the cause of death was sufficiently clear without even needing an autopsy, even through the porthole, even through the drone's camera—after all, the skull was crushed.

In the shape of the gold bar right beside it.

"A wrecked skull inside a shipwreck—I wonder if that's clever wordplay or not."

Ms. Kyoko touched her white hair and, once again, flopped back down onto the floor—did she collapse out of exasperation, or was she now reliving the experience of that skeleton? Indeed,

though one is underwater and the other on the surface, the situations are roughly similar—both are locked rooms inside ships.

"So, I figured the trick must be the same—because the same reasoning explains it, doesn't it? During the sinking, in the ship shaking like a shaker, a gold bar unfortunately flew and hit the head—"

"A gold bar wouldn't fly."

Because it's heavy.

Ms. Kyoko stated definitively—though she was likely just talking about the weight of gold, somehow, it sounded like she was talking about the importance of money.

"A corkscrew might be heavier than a cork, but it's incomparable to a gold bar. Since it's called a bar, it must be of considerable size."

I haven't seen it directly either—though, for that matter, no one has seen it directly—but well, it certainly wouldn't float on water.

One person might not even be able to lift it... indeed, no matter how severe the storm, be it a typhoon or a hurricane, it's hard to imagine something like that striking someone's head.

The ship wouldn't remain intact.

"Were no other bodies discovered from the sunken ship? That is, skeletons of other crew members."

"Of course—though I don't know if 'of course' is the right word, but of course they have been discovered. However, they are basically all bodies not in a locked state, so, how should I put it, their preservation state isn't very good—"

From what the drone saw, it doesn't seem like a murder occurred—but it's unlikely that the discovered skeletons represent everyone. During the sinking, and after it sank, a considerable number of bodies must have been washed away.

However, I thought that too was a common point with the 'second locked-room murder', where 'many people experienced the same fate, and one of them died in a way that looks like a locked-room murder'.

"If it's a sunken ship, it might have rotated underwater—just like a corkscrew, in a spinning manner, so wasn't there more random up-down-left-right motion for the entire ship? Even if up-down motion like a shaker is impossible, if there was a moment where up and down—that is, ceiling and floor—flipped, couldn't a gold bar fall from overhead?"

"I wonder, in that case, centrifugal force would also be at play. Also, fundamentally, the person and the gold bar would likely be on the same surface of the room."

Ms. Kyoko is skeptical.

From Ms. Kyoko's perspective, it seems she believes the mechanism of the 'first locked room' and the 'second locked room' are not the same—it's not an instance of 'what happens twice, happens thrice'. But, if that's the case, one must assume a completely different mechanism for the 'first locked room'—

"W-Well, as mentioned earlier, in that case—that discovery—I'm not suspected anyway. So there's no need to force a solution. Just solving the second locked room is enough. My false accusation is cleared with that—"

"What are you talking about? Unless the 'first locked room' is solved, my reasoning for the 'second locked room' will lack persuasiveness. Consequently, your false accusation hasn't been cleared either; it remains entirely under a cloudy sky."

Cloudy sky, she says.

That's unsettling. Especially at sea.

But indeed, thinking about it, there's no firm evidence, it's a hypothesis that stands largely on its persuasiveness.

"In this situation, I have no choice but to charge an additional fee and solve the first locked room as well."

An additional fee on top of the penalty fee?

Isn't that too predatory, Okitegami Detective Agency?

However, if the same reasoning cannot be reused, the reasoning for the 'first locked room' must be constructed from scratch, but the most reliable source, the first discoverer, died in this room, so testimony cannot be obtained—rather, the possibility even arises that the 'second locked-room murder' was caused to ensure the mystery of the 'first locked-room murder' remains unsolved.

It's getting complicated.

Or rather, tangled.

Worst case, not only could my suspicion resurface, but there was also the risk of the 'first locked room' being judged as my doing too—admittedly, so far, I haven't been suspected because it clearly happened before I was born, but it's not unprecedented in the past for me to have been falsely accused in ways that transcend such logic extra-legally.

I was once suspected of a murder that happened on the other side of the Earth—despite having a clear alibi of being detained in a Japanese detention center at the time. Well, no joke, suspicion sometimes ignores logic, and false accusations, when pushed, are pushed hard. Grindingly so.

Needs must when the devil drives.

Ms. Kyoko, who normally dislikes overtime, is showing motivation despite her seasickness; I suppose I have no choice but to pay the additional fee here—regular fee plus high-speed helicopter fee plus penalty fee plus optional additional fee.

This looks like it will be the largest guarantee amount ever.

Right now, I could almost understand the feelings of someone driven to commit a crime out of desire for gold bars, I couldn't deny saying.

"Understood, Ms. Kyoko. Please lend me your strength."

"Is that so? I feel rather apologetic, as if I prompted you."

Ms. Kyoko said this nonchalantly—no, brazenly.

This person herself might end up getting her head bashed in with a gold bar someday—she might even consider that an ideal way to die.

"Fortunately, my reasoning is already about eighty percent complete."

"What did you just say?"

This time, I was the one who said it.

7

"Wait a moment, Ms. Kyoko. Does that mean you already roughly see the truth?"

"Yes. I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning."

"T-Then why the additional fee?"

"Precisely because of that. Trying to conduct commerce with something that doesn't exist at all, isn't that just fictitious trading?"

What is this master detective, whose very existence seems fictitious, talking about—however, while 'from the very beginning' might be a first-rate bluff, when Ms. Kyoko says it, it's usually when the mystery is actually solved.

Even though the first discoverer is already dead—and thus the circumstances of the case are only hearsay from me.

"Hearsay is sufficient in this case. No, perhaps I should say legend is sufficient."

'Fitting for a sunken ship,' Ms. Kyoko said.

What 'fitting' means is unclear.

Hmm, this might be the amateurishness of an amateur like me, but when a professional solves a difficult problem so easily, it makes you feel like 'maybe I could have done it myself'—not that I intend to become a bad-paying regular client.

I want to be a valued customer.

But I still end up voicing amateur thoughts.

"Um, just like what happened in this room, if we think of it not as a locked-room murder, but purely as an accident that happened in a 'rocking locked room', then during a major rocking—major enough to sink—the victim couldn't stand, slipped, and hit their head hard on a gold bar lying on the floor, maybe?"

"That's good,"

said Ms. Kyoko.

"A gold bar lying on the floor, how wonderful."

Yeah.

As I said it, I thought so myself—what kind of situation is that?

No matter the era of the sunken ship, they wouldn't treat gold bars so carelessly—rather, wouldn't they store them on a shelf, maybe even in a safe, and manage them strictly so they wouldn't fall onto the floor even if the ship rocked?

At least, they wouldn't treat them like a corkscrew.

"Don't look so down. You were just one breath away from getting there."

Is that one breath the difference between an amateur and a pro?

That one breath.

"Yes. And it's the difference between living and dying."

"I-Is it that much of a difference?"

"To put it more strongly, it might be the difference between dying easily and dying in agony—perhaps."

Ms. Kyoko hinted enigmatically.

Still lying down—surrendering to the ship's rocking.

"Which do you prefer?"

"Eh? Well, if it's between dying easily and dying in agony, I'd want to die easily."

"Is that so."

"Isn't everyone like that? If you're going to be killed with a corkscrew, you'd rather be stabbed with a knife, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. Anyone would. That's why that skeleton person likely did just that—in the sinking ship, struck their own head with the gold bar."

Drowning.

They say it's the most agonizing way to die—

8

The truth of a locked-room murder being the victim's suicide is more classic than legendary, but suicide committed to avoid accidental death—when it's not a choice between living and dying, but a choice between dying easily and dying in agony, the story changes completely.

Amidst the stormy sea.

Inside a sinking ship.

Even if locked in a room, seawater relentlessly floods in—the ship is sinking. The chance of rescue is close to zero. They are no longer in the space between life and death. They are below that one plank. Other crew members are drowning one after another.

What would I do? Or, what would you do?

"The weight of the weapon, which was problematic earlier, works in reverse here—that is, as a weapon that can reliably ensure death even in such an unstable situation."

Indeed, inside the cabin—the 'moving locked room'—'movable heavy objects' are extremely limited—because heavier things are constructed precisely so they can't move around on a rocking ship.

Enter the gold bar.

At least, it's easier to die with—a weapon more likely to cause death than a corkscrew.

"No, but, isn't a gold bar still too heavy? Would it be a method like, deliberately—heaving it out of a safe—taking it out of a presumably secured safe, placing it on the floor, and then collapsing onto it?"

"That would be uncertain. Inside a sinking cabin where even up and down aren't fixed. One more breath."

"One more breath again?"

I feel like I'm suffocating.

Even though I'm not in seawater—in seawater?

"Yes, that's right. A gold bar won't naturally float or jump around in seawater—but couldn't you lift it?"

Because of buoyancy. Underwater.

It's heavy, yes—but it becomes a weight that isn't impossible to lift. As Archimedes proposed—

Then, Eureka.

By attributing such a solution to the first locked-room murder, the solution to the second locked-room murder also emerged and became established—and consequently, my false accusation was cleared.

"..."

Cleared.

But, on the other hand, my mood remained decidedly cloudy. Not quite a severe storm—but terribly gloomy.

"—Ms. Kyoko. Why did it sink, I wonder? That ship. So fast that there was no time to evacuate."

"Who knows. Even I, who can't stay silent when hearing about speed, don't know that much."

Ms. Kyoko shook her head curtly.

Still lying down.

"Maybe it was an exploration vessel like this one, but by plundering legendary gold bars hidden in an underwater cave, it incurred the wrath of the sea?"

She probably said that as a joke, but honestly, I was thinking something similar—it's far easier to conceive than a situation where gold bars just happen to be at hand when a ship is sinking. In that case, it feels more like a pirate ship than an exploration vessel—the wrath of the sea.

The judgment of mother nature.

Whether arrested by the police, captured by the captain, or detained by a detective, the line I shout ultimately remains the same—but if I were falsely accused by something so grand, I couldn't stand it, not in the slightest, I thought, forced into a nauseating feeling by emotions rocking so hard I could barely breathe.

Kyoko Okitegami's Seasickness—Forgotten

第四証　掟上今日子の猫アレルギー

Ch 4: Kyoko Okitegami’s Cat Allergy

1

"P—Please, let me call a detective!"

Just as 'when the wind blows, the coopers profit' (as we say in Japan), when I let out this customary, practically familiar, cry of anguish, it sets off a chain reaction where a master detective profits, but naturally, reaching that point involves several complex steps.

To begin with, since I am undeniably the party involved, my focus tends to be solely on the anguish of making the call, but there must be a certain mutuality, typical of human social communication, regarding how the party being called feels.

Or perhaps, a disconnect.

The 'party being called' here refers to both the detective and the police–for a detective, a client who is a victim of a false accusation makes the situation trickier than a standard investigation. Their stance changes, because it's like being misled from the very start–some understand that the task might actually be simpler, as the goal is to clear suspicion rather than find the true culprit, and while that is certainly true, and absolutely not the case for me, the fact that there are cases where the client pretends to be falsely accused but is actually the true culprit muddies the waters–the result of being 'deceived by the client' is, for a master detective, the greatest shame.

More shameful than mistaking the culprit.

Well, you could argue that a master detective is precisely someone who thrillingly enjoys such tactics and risks–which is why they readily respond to my 'summons,' but honestly, I also feel rather bad about the kind of tension the other party passively receiving the call for a detective, the police (or the prosecutor, or the court–), experiences when called.

Arresting me, and by extension, suspecting me, is tantamount to indirectly pointing out that they are completely mistaken–to put it dramatically, this could even be seen as an act hostile to state power.

Even just pointing out someone's mistake is awkward enough.

It's awkward for both sides.

Of course, self-defense is a right recognized by the state, so I have no intention whatsoever of rebelling against the state (though I have been charged with treason before), and just like the right to remain silent, one shouldn't hesitate to exercise it–absolutely must not hesitate–but when I call a detective, and the master detective profits, it rarely leads to a 'happily ever after.'

Humans find it difficult not only to avoid making mistakes, but also to admit them.

I too can proudly say I've never broken the law, but if asked whether I've never made a mistake in my life, well, that's obviously not true–my life is full of mistakes, a life full of shame.

Unfortunately, there's also a vicious cycle where clearing one's name only deepens the suspicion–the logic being, 'Going so far as to call a detective to clear his name? That's way too suspicious.'

It's the kind of complexity, subtlety, and inscrutability of human psychology that makes you want to tear your hair out wondering what you're supposed to do–having suspicion deepen because you cleared a false accusation. If the proverb 'when the wind blows, the coopers profit' had a continuation, it might be something like–the cooper's sudden profit is suspected of being ill-gotten, triggering an audit.

Things rarely end happily ever after.

However, just to add for clarification, though I've continued to call countless detectives, there have been almost no instances where I called a detective and the detective didn't profit–every single one of them has successfully earned their fee.

Conversely, this also means that my mobile phone's contact list does not include any selfless detectives who would undertake solving a case for free.

2

"It's a cat door, isn't it? This."

'It's completely imperfect for a locked room'–Ms. Kyoko said. There was a nuance of being somehow unsatisfied, or perhaps wanting something more–well, perhaps an imperfect locked room is anticlimactic for a master detective.

Rest assured.

I am also a professional client.

I didn't call you to the scene just to disappoint a master detective with an imperfect locked room–I will definitely meet your expectations.

The scene is a detached house in the suburbs, and the gist of this case is that the homeowner, who lived alone, met a suspicious death inside–'suspicious death,' of course, means just that, but viewed from the opposite angle, it also means that, for now, it hasn't been definitively ruled a murder case yet.

Naturally, speaking realistically, not all suspicious deaths become criminal cases, but this time, it's a matter that should definitely be investigated on the premise of it being a case–because the deceased man who lived alone was a former police officer.

"And actually, he was a police officer I had a connection with–um, it's difficult to phrase, but a long time ago, I was questioned by him."

"Were you arrested?"

Ms. Kyoko bluntly cut in while seemingly enjoying flipping the cat door back and forth from the entryway side, whether finding it curious, or perhaps having seen it before but having forgotten–lacking in delicacy, perhaps, but truly the fastest detective.

It helps that she gets straight to the point.

It helps even more if her reasoning is fast.

"Yes, it was a long time ago–it's long since resolved. My name was completely cleared. They say innocence and acquittal are different, but in my case, they're the same. I am innocent. If anything, I have a sterling reputation. In the newspapers back then, I was nicknamed Sterling."

"Claiming it that strongly makes it sound rather fake, you know."

Ms. Kyoko cast a doubtful gaze through her glasses–the complexity of human psychology. Well, suspecting the unsuspicious is, rather than a basic principle, perhaps the principle of a master detective.

Indeed, the Sterling part was a lie.

I may have been called the modern Professor Moriarty, but never Sterling.

However, this goes against the Forgetful Detective's cardinal rule of 'Absolute Confidentiality,' so I can't tell her this, but the master detective who cleared my name back then was none other than Kyoko Okitegami, director of the Okitegami Detective Agency–she, whose memory resets daily, has completely forgotten it, but that means the former police officer who died suspiciously could also be described as Ms. Kyoko's fated rival from that time.

There was quite an exchange, quite a back-and-forth, so it was a memorable false accusation–a memorable case for me too, but the fact that that confrontation is now completely non-existent in Ms. Kyoko's mind feels somewhat disheartening.

Though there's nothing anyone can do about it...

However, putting that aside, that false accusation case is a distant cause of the current matter–because that's precisely why I'm being falsely suspected again. I haven't been arrested yet, nor detained or secured, but based on the atmosphere during the initial questioning, I decided to exercise my instincts as the False Accusations King here.

The fastest client, if not the fastest detective.

Nipping the false accusation in the bud.

"I see. In short, Mr. Kakushidate, you are suspected of having sought revenge this time out of resentment for being falsely accused in the past, is that it?"

"It's not quite that specific a crisis looming yet, but the reason the suspicious death isn't being dismissed as just a suspicious death and an investigation is underway seems to be along those lines–apparently, the approach is to talk to everyone connected to the cases he handled as a former police officer."

Well, perhaps they're just telling me that–in reality, the former officer's record was apparently upright and brilliant, and the only thing, if anything, was my false accusation case.

I offer my deepest condolences to the deceased, but for me, this is intolerable. Not only am I wrongly suspected, but I'm also being told I might have committed the crime out of resentment for being falsely accused–what kind of endless hell is this?

Were they waiting for him to retire?

"So I want to preemptively clear my future false accusation now. A suspicious death inside a locked-up detached house–the man was elderly, and there were no signs of violence, but the problem is this cat door."

"What's the problem with the cat door?"

Ms. Kyoko was, for some reason, trying to put both her hands–no, both her arms–through the cat door. Perhaps checking the scene's locked-room integrity, or rather–whether a human could pass through that cat door.

No matter how petite Ms. Kyoko is, getting through a cat door would surely be impossible–they say a cat can squeeze through any hole its head fits through, but humans, with their shoulder width, likely cannot.

Forget my head, even my palm probably wouldn't fit.

If there's one thing I'm confident in, it's my large size, fittingly enough.

"He didn't own a cat, you see. The victim, the former police officer."

"Huh?"

Without pulling her arms out of the cat door, Ms. Kyoko turned around and looked up at me. Of course she would, because the logic implies he installed a cat door in his entrance despite not owning a cat.

To call it logic, the logic is rather bent.

Not only that.

"Incidentally, the man's cause of death was asphyxiation due to respiratory difficulty."

"Asphyxiation."

"Asphyxiation due to a cat allergy... is what is suspected."

At the very least.

There was no doubt it was a suspicious death.

3

To begin with, the cat door itself, an exit door for cats, is something rarely seen in modern Japan–because letting cats roam freely outside isn't highly recommended.

Moreover, the reason why someone with a cat allergy would install a cat door in their entrance is virtually unthinkable–the suspicious death is suspicious, but this entrance, a component constituting the locked room of the detached house, is suspicious first and foremost.

A door within a door that shouldn't exist.

Unless it's an entrance for fairies from another world, one can only assume that someone other than the homeowner installed it arbitrarily, with a specific intent–let me repeat, the former police officer did not own a cat. Since it's a detached house he owned, there's likely no pet restriction, but owning a cat despite having a cat allergy is highly unlikely.

"That's not necessarily true. Some people keep them through sheer willpower–however, a cat allergy is likely something willpower can't overcome."

Having given up on entering through the cat door, Ms. Kyoko opened the regular human door, entered the house, and headed towards the second-floor bedroom where the owner had died, saying this–let me add for clarity, this is not illegal entry.

Permission has been obtained from the relevant parties.

Since the victim was an old acquaintance (even including Ms. Kyoko, though she herself has forgotten), the procedures went relatively smoothly–perhaps because I am both the prime suspect and a former victim of a false accusation, my opinions were easier to get across.

That's not exactly pleasing either, but... well, it means this isn't a situation where I have to commit a crime to clear a false accusation.

This time.

"Certainly, cat allergy symptoms vary, so I think it depends on the person. However, it seems certain that the victim this time did not own a cat."

Of course, the possibility remains that he tried to keep one secretly, unregistered and unknown to anyone, because people would likely oppose him keeping a cat despite his allergy... but looking around the house like this, there's no trace of it.

"That's right. There's no cat tower, for one thing."

Not every cat owner's house necessarily has a cat tower–however, food bowls and a cat litter box should be essential.

They are nowhere to be found.

The house isn't particularly tidy, nor is it hopelessly messy; there are cardboard boxes stacked up, trash neatly collected–it feels like a typical home of an elderly man living alone. Therefore, it's unlikely they're buried somewhere–although keeping a cat in a way that its accessories get buried probably isn't recommended either.

Meaning—

"So, the police are thinking something like this, aren't they? That the culprit used a cat as a weapon, as a means of murder."

A cat as a weapon.

It sounds like a comical joke, but in reality, allergies, while infinitely varied, are individually serious–cases involving life-threatening reactions are by no means rare. One can even die from consuming common foodstuffs that are not inherently poisonous–so it follows that someone might attempt to misuse this fact.

Just like using a knife or a gun.

Some might use buckwheat noodles or peanuts.

Then perhaps a cat too—

"And for that purpose, the culprit installed a cat door at the victim's entrance? Manipulated a cat, made it attack the victim?"

Lying down on the bedroom bed as if it were perfectly natural, Ms. Kyoko rattled this off–it seemed less like her usual exhaustive deduction and more like a preliminary confirmation of the premise. Since such careful confirmation is a step she usually skips cheerfully, it felt like she wasn't really buying into that hypothesis much.

...She really does lie down a lot.

Just like a cat, really.

"Is it unthinkable?"

For Ms. Kyoko, who sometimes proposes even more outlandish hypotheses during her exhaustive deduction, she seemed remarkably passive.

"Well, I'm a cat person. Perhaps my brain doesn't work well with ideas that frame cats as weapons."

"Ah."

Come to think of it, I vaguely recall her saying something like that sometime, to someone, long ago–even if she did, it was likely information heard amidst a case, so I can't tell her that.

"However, I can't just avert my eyes from the risk simply because 'cats are cute.' Just like I can't avert my eyes from hay fever simply because 'flowers are beautiful'."

Indeed.

Severe hay fever can be extremely serious and significantly impact one's quality of life, yet sufferers are sometimes exposed to a lack of understanding from others–I myself am probably not immune to such prejudices.

My thinking is biased.

In fact, until I became a person of interest in this case, it's fair to say I knew almost nothing about what a cat allergy was.

"Hmm. So, Mr. Kakushidate, you don't have a cat allergy?"

"No. Well, that doesn't mean I own one either–I have almost no contact with them. So, perhaps I actually have a cat allergy but just haven't realized it myself."

"I see, I see."

"Is something the matter?"

"I'm considering what attributes the culprit might have, assuming a cat was used as a weapon–on one hand, I think someone with a cat allergy wouldn't use a cat as a weapon, but on the other, it seems plausible that precisely because they have a cat allergy, they might conceive of using a cat as a vicious weapon."

Suspecting the client again.

Suspecting the client first and foremost.

Moreover, questioning me with the clever logic of an interrogation, cornering me whether I answer yes or no to having a cat allergy–next, is she going to say that because I don't own a cat, I could heartlessly use one as a weapon? Even though one could argue that precisely because someone is a cat owner, they could train a cat to do such a thing.

But, one way or another, the exhaustive deduction has begun.

She'll likely catch up quickly.

"Yes. The idea of using animals as weapons itself is familiar from mystery novels. It's familiar even to the memory of a Forgetful Detective. So, let's consider it without letting personal preference get in the way."

Then, Ms. Kyoko took a breath and,

"Can cats even be controlled in the first place?"

She asked.

"I have an image of them as free-spirited, capricious, and uncontrollable."

"I see—"

Like you, I refrained from saying.

If one were to 'train' them as a weapon, dogs seem more suitable. I don't own a dog either, so this is purely based on image... but likely, Hachiko the loyal dog has improved the image of dogs in Japan.

The image of a loyal friend.

"You don't see cats doing 'sit' or 'shake paw,' do you?"

"It's probably not completely unheard of, but it's likely akin to searching for a 'white crow'–and if you're going to go to that trouble, you'd be better off taming a dog."

She said 'taming.'

No, the meaning is the same as 'train'–but it seems she really is a cat person.

"So, if they wanted to ensure the murder, the culprit should have installed a dog door, not a cat door?"

"No, no. If the victim had a dog allergy, they might have done that, but if it was a cat allergy, they'd have no choice but to use a cat, or at least a feline animal. If we're sticking to the animal weapon theory, that is."

Animals in general–insects and plants too–can probably be allergens, but not all allergens share the same root cause. A dog allergy and a cat allergy would be completely different. Even with hay fever, cedar pollen and ragweed pollen must be different.

Come to think of it, is there such a thing as cherry blossom hay fever?

"Speaking of felines, if one could control lions or tigers, it feels like you could just have them attack normally, rather than inducing a cat allergy. Though they probably couldn't fit through a cat door."

Even if the entrance is impossible, they could probably break a window–no, realistically, unless you're a zookeeper or a circus performer, you wouldn't have the opportunity to train lions or tigers, would you?

"Hmm. Well then, let's shortcut this, albeit somewhat forcefully, and assume the culprit used a cat–they installed a cat door in the entrance without the owner noticing, and had it nab the victim during a nap."

Nab them during a nap?

I thought it was a bad pun, but if the victim had been awake, he surely would have taken some evasive action the moment the cat approached–since he himself would be most familiar with the threat of cats.

Given that he actually died in this bedroom, and if the culprit insisted on the 'method' of cat allergy, having the cat attack him in his sleep would be the best approach.

Using a cat.

"Sneaking up quietly is a cat's specialty, isn't it? Because they have paw pads, they don't make footsteps, or so they say–but if they can get that close without being noticed, even a cat, not a lion, could likely attack with fangs or claws."

Did they insist on killing via cat allergy, even if it lacked certainty? They say humans can't even beat a kitten barehanded...

"It's also a common thing I hear about pet cats, them getting into their owner's bedding uninvited. Regarding cat training, it's possible they utilized such innate behaviors–though whether it would crawl into a stranger's lap is another matter."

Is it okay to leave that aside?

They also have a strong image as wary animals–however, an order like 'seek warmth' seems more likely to be followed than commands like 'scratch, bite.'

Though it's a murder method limited to winter.

From what I've seen so far, there doesn't seem to be a heated table installed in this house–unlike the cat door, they didn't arbitrarily install a heated table, I guess.

"Well, if you arbitrarily installed a heated table, you'd obviously get caught, wouldn't you?"

"If you say that, arbitrarily installing a cat door seems like something that would be noticed immediately too."

Today's Ms. Kyoko is cautious.

Perhaps she's fighting for the honor of cats–though I wish she'd clear the client's false accusation, not the cat's.

However, she does have a point.

Let alone a former police officer, even an ordinary citizen–if one day a cat door suddenly appeared on their home's door, wouldn't they find it suspicious?

Before dying suspiciously.

Is it really possible for the homeowner not to notice such a bold renovation?–Well, but in reality, change is something you sometimes don't notice. 'It changed before I knew it' tends to be a blind spot.

Like how people surprisingly don't notice a gorilla crossing a basketball court.

"It's the same in mystery novels. There's a psychological trick where the larger the scale of the setup, the less likely it is to be noticed."

Is the idea that big lies are harder to expose than small lies also a classic trope?–In that case, maybe arbitrarily installing a heated table wouldn't have been noticed either.

"Realistically, if you were to install a cat door, rather than modifying the existing door on site, it would be quicker to replace the entire door, hinges and all, with an identical one that already has a cat door built in. You'd still need to bypass security, but you'd surely want to minimize time spent inside a former policeman's house."

While I think that's a clever method, if that's possible, I also think they could just attack the victim themselves while they sleep–no, I don't think 'they should'–but if the culprit has an extraordinary obsession with killing via cat allergy.

Indeed, it surely isn't a pleasant way to die.

If it was an intentional murder, the intent might be malice rather than mere murderous intent.

"Are you speculating that there might not have been intent to kill, Mr. Kakushidate?"

"Ah... no, that wasn't what I meant..."

I intended it as a rhetoric about malice surpassing murderous intent, but hearing it put that way again, I started to feel that line of reasoning might be possible.

Rather realistic, even.

Dolus eventualis–or probabilistic crime, as mystery jargon might put it... Would the culprit claim, 'I didn't intend to kill'?

As the cat-loving Ms. Kyoko pointed out, it's a trick whose success is doubtful in the first place–even if it worked perfectly, it's highly possible it would just end with sneezing and a runny nose during sleep.

Perhaps that was enough for the culprit, perhaps just imagining the victim like that was satisfying–perhaps the unexpectedly severe symptoms, leading to a suspicious death, were actually unforeseen.

'I never thought he would die'–they might say.

"In that case, there's no need even to train a cat. Just install an inviting-looking cat door, and stray cats might sneak in on their own."

Would they sneak in? Well, if it's a probabilistic crime, then even a slight probability is sufficient–if they made countless other approaches, layering low probabilities to increase the overall chance.

For example, feeding stray cats to increase the density of cats in the vicinity–what prevents me from dismissing this hypothesis as pure fantasy is the fact that Ms. Kyoko herself, faced with the cat door, seemed drawn to stick both hands through it.

Perhaps not just cats, but anyone might feel the urge to flip such a door back and forth if they saw one.

"Although, stray cats have decreased recently. Feeding them is also considered bad manners in many cases."

"Is that so?"

Ms. Kyoko looked blank.

For Ms. Kyoko, whose memory resets daily, the 'common knowledge' that feeding stray cats is bad manners seems novel.

Does she know about community cats?

"Community cats? How are they different from stray cats?"

"They're cats that have been neutered or spayed, and are, so to speak, cared for by the community. Their ear tips are clipped so you can tell."

"Huh–times certainly are changing."

Ms. Kyoko nodded, in a way that made it hard to tell if she was impressed by the animal welfare spirit as a cat lover, or if she found human arrogance hard to accept–it's refreshing to have something to teach a master detective, but indeed, I don't have a firm opinion myself.

Times are undoubtedly changing, though.

You can't stop it, and it's true you get left behind if you're not careful.

In any case, on the way to this house–this crime scene–I saw neither stray cats nor community cats at all. Meaning this isn't the kind of town where a cat might suddenly jump into your garden–not the kind of town where simply installing a cat door could make a murder plan viable.

"So maybe the victim didn't even know what a cat door was. Even if some mysterious little window was arbitrarily installed on his entrance, perhaps he didn't think it was a device threatening his life–unless you have some knowledge about cats, the idea of a cat door itself probably wouldn't occur to you."

Putting aside the pros and cons of letting cats roam outside–for the victim with a cat allergy, going out of one's way to create an entrance just for cats might have been utterly bizarre, right?

So, the possibility that he overlooked it might be quite high–a disconnect in values is unavoidable. Simply put, the victim might also have been on the side 'left behind' by the changing times.

"That's right. Being a retired former police officer, age-wise, he might be from the generation where cat food was just a saucer of milk."

"Absolutely unacceptable by today's standards, though."

It's well-known now that you shouldn't feed them onions or chocolate–well, I'm not exactly knowledgeable about what ingredients *are* safe either. I heard somewhere that lilies are taboo... and surely cats have individual allergies too.

"Well, lacking such knowledge means I wouldn't be able to train a cat. I haven't the faintest idea what to give as a reward treat."

"Isn't it because you keep repeating statements like that at crucial moments that the suspicion deepens?"

A harsh criticism.

She's right, but on the other hand, if I just meekly kept saying things like 'it's understandable that I'm suspected,' a guilty verdict would be inevitable–self-assertion is necessary. I don't want to make waves, but I have to stir up some wind.

There was a similar back-and-forth with the former police officer who was killed–though I can't be sure it was murder yet. Back then, (after calling Ms. Kyoko), the mystery was solved, the true culprit identified, and I thought that was the grand finale, but I never imagined it would resurface years later in this form...

Am I a comet?

Even if my life is like a mystery novel, it doesn't proceed like one–to confess honestly, even I myself, amidst my daily life... amidst the daily pile-up of false accusations, while I wouldn't say I'd forgotten, it was a case I no longer recalled.

After that, I had no further interaction with the victim, the former police officer... and forgive me for saying, but I'm vague even on what kind of person he was. Even when shown his photo, it didn't immediately ring a bell–the police officers who came for questioning seemed suspicious of my attitude then, but I couldn't lie there either.

During the false accusation, I was too preoccupied with my own situation–I didn't have the mental capacity to consider what kind of person the other party was. Judging by the tone of the officers who questioned me, he seemed to have been well-liked by the younger generation... but well, no matter what kind of person he was, no human deserves to be killed like this.

Using a cat as a weapon might sound fanciful or fantastical depending on how you look at it, but objectively viewed, it likely amounts to a cruel death penalty–I've read in books about execution methods using goats, but it seems cruel not only to humans but also qualifies as abuse towards the animal.

Being used as a tool for murder.

"Animal abuse, you say–hmm. You are quite right, Mr. Kakushidate. If such a trick was employed, I cannot help but condemn the culprit."

Ms. Kyoko sat up abruptly from the bed–should I call this a different kind of cat allergy? Since hearing that a cat was the weapon, her motivation seemed lacking, but apparently, she found a hook to inspire herself.

No, really, I wish she'd just make saving her client her motivation–I'm paying what I owe, after all.

Perhaps the image of cats as capricious and free truly does resonate with Ms. Kyoko–although, in Ms. Kyoko's case, it's never 'gold coins for a cat', a Japanese expression akin to 'casting pearls before swine'.

4

What exactly is a cat allergy, anyway?

Being neither a sufferer nor a cat owner, my knowledge was hair-thin, so taking this opportunity to look it up, it seems the allergen is a substance found in the cat's sebaceous glands and

salivary glands–and since cats also have the habit of grooming themselves with their tongues, the allergen ends up being spread all over their fur.

Touching or approaching a cat, of course, leads to ingesting the allergen, and shed hair can also spread the allergen through the air–even without getting close, just being in a place where a cat has been can trigger an immune response.

Speaking of immune responses, anaphylactic shock is apparently one such example–realistically, one can't help but think, as a layman, that the homeowner's suspicious death might have been caused not just by the cat allergy itself, but by some resulting complication.

Age-wise, one could say his immunity might actually be weakening, but inevitably, as humans gain life experience, they accumulate ailments–they say hay fever is also cumulative.

Being in perfect health is probably something like a miracle–though if the trade-off is a tendency towards false accusations, the price feels far too steep.

Now then.

Ms. Kyoko, who, in exchange for a forgetful nature that resets her memory daily, has acquired irreplaceable qualities as a master detective, readjusted her focus. The first thing she did was to 'search for the cat.'

More accurately, 'search for traces of the cat'–she began crawling around the house, much like a cat herself, searching for physical evidence of whether a cat was inside this house at the time of the incident.

Despite her 'fastest detective' signboard often creating an image of an armchair detective, Ms. Kyoko doesn't seem hesitant to engage in tasks resembling standard detective work, like 'searching for pets'–rather, to thoroughly embody 'fastest,' she doesn't hesitate to act.

Well, it's different from searching for a pet.

I had vaguely concluded that since there was no litter box or food bowl, there probably wasn't a cat, but that judgment was based solely on the standard of him owning a cat–what Ms. Kyoko is searching for now are traces of a cat having 'intruded.'

Traces of illegal entry through the cat door.

"It would be best if we could find a hiding cat somewhere, you know–that would go beyond physical evidence and be close to finding the culprit."

The culprit cat? The 'catprit', perhaps?

Saying this, Ms. Kyoko briskly opened closets, examined chests of drawers, peered under the sofa, checked the contents of trash cans, and looked behind bookshelves–they're not insects, so I can't help thinking they wouldn't be behind a bookshelf, but perhaps this too is a cat novice's assumption.

If you underestimate a cat's flexibility, you'll never find one–I hear even pet cats can get lost inside the house. Searching inside the refrigerator or washing machine is probably overkill, but well, there's always a slim chance–a cat opening a door with its paw isn't unheard of.

"If a cat was hiding somewhere in the house, and we managed to find it, would that solve the case?"

"Hmm, if that cat doesn't take a liking to Mr. Kakushidate, it might prove you're not the culprit? Meaning, if Mr. Kakushidate gets scratched or bitten by the cat, your false accusation can be cleared."

Why must I be subjected to such a thing–even without a cat allergy, getting scratched or bitten hurts. That said, it's not impossible that a cat might suddenly take a liking to someone–besides, if it's a cat manipulated by someone, it's conceivable it was originally a friendly cat.

Such cats exist–or rather, one could say that because it was such a cat, it was selected as the weapon in a case like this.

"If it was used as a tool for murder precisely because it was friendly, that's also animal abuse–meow meow."

I wondered what that was suddenly, but apparently, she was calling out in a coaxing voice to the potentially hiding cat. As Ms. Kyoko searched for the cat from a cat's perspective, on all fours in the hallway, the fact that it didn't emerge even after all that might mean there really is no cat in this house.

When to stop searching for a lost item isn't for me to decide, as I couldn't really help much for fear of getting in the way.

"Well, after the body was removed, the police probably searched the house thoroughly anyway."

"It hasn't officially become a criminal case yet, right? In that case, conducting a second search should have meaning."

Indeed, if a large-scale investigation team determined to find a cat at all costs had been assembled, I would have been arrested long ago–the very fact that I am still free like this indicates that the suspicious death is still strictly within the realm of 'suspicious.'

It hasn't reached deliberation.

However.

"Let's stop here. Forget a cat, there were no traces of a cat having been here either–no paw prints anywhere."

Ms. Kyoko called off the search activity here.

But paw prints... is that what she was looking for?

You see them often in manga, and indeed, if footprints (or sole prints, to use mystery novel terminology) had been left behind, there couldn't have been a clearer development...

"Ideally, it would be straightforward if we could bring someone with a cat allergy here and have them test whether they experience symptoms inside this house."

"That's quite an idea."

It sounds like an inhumane investigation method for an inhumane execution, likely to draw criticism.

Never mind towards cats, there's a lack of affection towards humans.

Although, as mentioned repeatedly, cat allergy symptoms vary greatly–some people are fine unless they have close contact like hugging, while others might feel breathless just entering a house where a cat has been.

In any case, I don't have any acquaintances with cat allergies–based on statistics, there probably are some among my acquaintances, but I'm not aware of them.

Needless to say for Ms. Kyoko.

"Yes. Even if I knew, I'd forget. Acquaintances, that is."

Like the former police officer victim.

Or like me.

"It's also possible that I myself have a cat allergy and have just forgotten about it."

"Is that possible? Something like that."

While you should never blindly believe 'illness starts from the mind' and self-diagnose allergies as being 'all in your head,' the influence of stress on symptoms and the placebo effect are factors that likely cannot be completely ignored.

Anaphylactic shock, for instance, is probably a case of 'the body remembering' having been stung by a bee once–

"Incidentally, as a fundamental check, was the victim, the homeowner, aware? That he himself had a cat allergy–you know, for people who want to own cats or like cats, it's a serious condition, but like Mr. Kakushidate might be, don't you think people who don't realize it could go their whole lives without knowing?"

Come to think of it.

It would likely be difficult to remain unaware of developing hay fever, but with a cat allergy, if one never encounters feline creatures, it might never be discovered.

Whether that's ultimately a good thing or not, I don't know–perhaps even I, believing myself to be healthy (in exchange for my false accusation susceptibility), might unknowingly harbor some latent illness.

It would be tragic if it were discovered during an emergency, only realizing it when it's already too late–which is why annual health checkups are important.

"I can't say for certain... but in this case, it's hard to imagine a scenario where the perpetrator knew but the victim himself didn't, so I suspect he was aware."

"I see. An insightful view."

Rarely, Ms. Kyoko praised my opinion–which is pleasing, but perhaps I overstepped my role as the master detective's assistant. I should stick strictly to assisting the master detective, offering only hypotheses that serve as stepping stones.

"In that case, two further possibilities arise. He knew, but the choice is whether he knew in detail or not."

"Knew in detail or not? If he knew, wouldn't he naturally know in detail? Otherwise, it concerns his life–or if not life, at least his health."

"Not necessarily. There are people who catch a cold but don't want to go to the hospital, right? Some people don't even want to take their temperature."

Are there?, I thought, but yes, there are.

Imagining it as an illness made me reflexively think 'that can't be right,' but thinking about times I've been injured, I have experiences of insisting I was totally fine, okay–what was that confidence, I wonder?

Or perhaps, bravado.

Less unfounded confidence, perhaps more a fear of being given a diagnosis based on evidence? A desire to look away–even though they say one in two people will get cancer, the reason many don't know the details about the disease called cancer, nor try to find out, could be said to be because one in two people get cancer.

Knowledge is power, but it is also fear.

Fear so great it makes you want to look away.

Some people refuse to admit they have hay fever, no matter how much they sneeze in spring–I say this like an objective observer, but perhaps I too will become like that someday.

You know how they say doctors are the worst at taking care of themselves? This is like the patient's version of that.

Since I'm the patient, it's just plain neglect.

"So, the choice is between whether the victim homeowner knew about cat allergies in detail and properly addressed the tendencies and countermeasures, or completely avoided the topic and simply mechanically kept cats away?"

"Yes. Even without knowing details like the cause being an immune reaction to cat biological substances, or that even without an allergy, kissing a cat can be life-threatening, avoiding cats completely isn't difficult–as long as someone doesn't sic one on you."

Kissing a cat can be life-threatening?

That's news to me too–thinking about it impersonally, I really hope it's the former of the two options, but putting myself in the victim's shoes, I can understand the feeling even if it ended up being the latter.

Normally, you wouldn't expect someone to sic a cat on you, and if you found out somehow you had a cat allergy, you might develop an aversion to the very term 'cat allergy'–you might not just want to look away, but might not even want to think about it.

If that's the case, what happens?

"If he was knowledgeable about cat allergies, he would naturally know the concept of a cat door, and if something like that was arbitrarily installed, he wouldn't just immediately be suspicious, but should also feel intense danger–right? Otherwise, it's like having a hole opened in his entrance, so even if he were highly cautious, it's unlikely he'd think someone was trying to harm him through such a roundabout method."

A prank or harassment–at most, maybe considered related to burglary, but unlikely thought of as part of a murder plot. It's an undeniably audacious crime to attempt on a former police officer's home, but on the other hand, precisely because the victim was a former police officer, it's conceivable he might think it wasn't serious enough to bother his old colleagues.

If he had consulted someone (at his former workplace) and learned it was a cat door, he would have understood the danger and immediately taken measures to block it–no, but, thinking logically, even if its identity was unknown, if a hole appeared in your entrance, wouldn't you at least cover it with duct tape?

Perhaps that too is a kind of normalcy bias, wanting to believe 'this isn't a big deal, not worth taking action over,' which might lead one to deliberately leave it unblocked–

"That's right. A young woman might leave home that day and stay at her parents' or a friend's place."

A young woman might, and depending on the person, even a sturdy man might–what about a retired former police officer?

There are homes where people don't habitually lock their doors, so again, one can't generalize... but I don't think I could just ignore it, thinking 'Did little elves make this for the kitty while I slept?'

I'd probably think it was foreshadowing a new false accusation.

Well, in this case, the cat door was actually installed, and the homeowner actually died from a cat allergy, so perhaps there's no point denying it or finding it suspicious–there's likely no point picking holes in reality, saying 'He should have felt something was off,' 'He should have been suspicious if a cat door was installed,' 'The suspicious death could have been avoided.'

"No point, you say–hmm. There is nothing in this world that has no point, you know."

Ms. Kyoko said a line that could be taken as either profound or just something that sounds profound to deflect–while climbing the stairs on all fours. Said in that posture, even if she meant it seriously, it doesn't quite resonate–anyway, having finished exploring the house, she seems intent on returning to the bedroom, the heart of the crime scene.

Doing so, her behavior resembles that of a cat exploring its territory–but maybe she could stop the all-fours thing now?

Well, they say Sherlock Holmes also crawled around the crime scene floor with a magnifying glass (a common anecdote, though I haven't read that scene myself. Maybe I read it and forgot–a forgetful reader), so perhaps it's not just cat-like behavior but also detective-like behavior.

"What do you mean by that?"

I ask her retreating figure.

"Do you mean the victim fell into the culprit's trap while thinking the cat door was strange? Just like–a cat being drawn to a prepared cat door."

Perhaps I should say, like a cat drawn to an empty cardboard box, rather than a cat door–it seems plausible that by deliberately installing something suspicious, they stimulated the former police officer's instincts.

"No, I meant it with the nuance that the cat door itself might be a misdirection. Meaning, perhaps the cat door didn't exist when the victim returned home?"

"Eh?"

"To put it more strongly, perhaps the culprit installed the cat door after the victim died–that would eliminate the risk of it being found suspicious, wouldn't it?"

Well, it would eliminate the risk–and also eliminate the near-miss 'accident' of the homeowner returning while it was being installed–but, installing it after the incident creates a time paradox.

Since 'The Door into Summer' (not the entrance door, the sci-fi film), or perhaps since 'Doraemon,' cats and time machines are said to be compatible... but without an entrance, the cat can't get inside the house.

"Even if there was a cat door, it's also true that the cat might not necessarily be drawn to it. Just like installing a cat tower doesn't guarantee the cat will play with it."

That's another common anecdote.

Even if you provide toys or houses thinking of the cat, whether they like it or not ultimately depends on the cat's mood–even if the culprit smugly installed a cat door, acting like the mastermind of a manipulation mystery, the cat might nonchalantly ignore it.

Though the probabilistic crime perspective suggests the incident occurred precisely because that probability was overcome–

"It's possible to consider that there was another entry route for the cat, besides the cat door. It's rather natural. Mother Nature natural. Perhaps the cat door was installed later to conceal that entry route."

A cover-up operation rather than destructive work?

A retrofitted cat door–an entrance installed after the cat fulfilled its role seems somewhat like locking the barn door after the horse has bolted, but since I hadn't considered such an idea until now and had assumed the cat entered (and exited) through there, it's not entirely off the wall.

A paradigm shift.

"That's why, while searching for traces of the cat, I was also exploring whether there might be another route–but it wasn't promising."

Said Ms. Kyoko.

Sharp-eyed, or perhaps multitasking–even if it wasn't enough to warrant a full investigation team, her meticulous continuation of the crime scene investigation (on all fours) apparently had another objective.

She wasn't just looking for paw prints.

Unfortunately, that search also seems to have yielded no results–no cat-sized back door found, huh.

"Just as you don't know where they hide, you often don't know where cats come in from. Even through drains or vents."

That sounds more like an entry route for rats or insects–but apparently, at least there were no cracked walls or underground passages.

"Simply put, couldn't it be that a window was unlocked at the time of the incident? And was only locked for security after the scene investigation."

That too would be locking the barn door after the horse has bolted–well, since this is billed, for now, as a locked-room murder case, such an oversight is unlikely.

"From a Schrödinger's cat perspective, whether there's a cat inside the house is always indeterminate, though."

Hmm.

But this case is a mystery, not sci-fi.

Neither time paradoxes nor Schrödinger's cat are theories that should be adopted–we must demand a logical solution in the style of a mystery novel.

Even if my false accusation were cleared based on quantum mechanics, I'd still feel unsatisfied.

I want to be saved just like Ms. Kyoko saved me last time when this homeowner falsely accused me–saying that feels somewhat like going in circles, a sense of futility from just repeating the same thing over and over.

Instead of 'when the wind blows, the coopers profit,' it's like saying 'when the wind blows, the wind blows.'

"We need the cooper to profit, at least—"

"What did you just say?"

And then.

Ms. Kyoko stopped in her tracks at my casual mutter and turned around–'tracks' in this case referring to the hands and feet she was using to crawl up the stairs.

Turning around suddenly like that really is a cat-like gesture–reacting to a casual mutter, too.

"Ah, no, it's just a proverb. Completely unrelated to the case, um–'when the wind blows, the coopers profit'—"

It's hard to explain.

Did she react to the word 'profit'?

I did indeed mutter it as an analogy for 'the master detective profits,' but even so, since the previous case is taboo for the confidentiality-bound Ms. Kyoko, it's difficult to explain what made me think of that proverb.

Compared to the suspicious death, I worried about how to navigate this incredibly minor pinch, but–Ms. Kyoko turning around here wasn't for that reason.

"When the wind blows, the coopers profit–if you had mentioned that at the beginning, Mr. Kakushidate, I wouldn't have had to imitate a cat's meow, you know."

"Eh?"

Even being told that with narrowed eyes gleaming like a cat's in the night–I actually did mention it right at the start.

And the cat imitation looked like something she was doing quite enthusiastically.

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When the wind blows, the coopers profit.

I used it like it was obvious because it's a very frequently used proverb, but thinking about it now, it's a rather un-modern cliché–proverbs being old-fashioned is natural, but this one potentially contains ethical problems.

Because, put simply, or rather, shortened by omitting the middle steps, the proverb officially goes like this: When the wind blows → dust swirls → dust gets in eyes → people become blind → they take up playing the 'shamisen' (a type of lute) → cats are hunted to make shamisens → rats increase as a result → buckets get gnawed → coopers profit.

Although the main point of the proverb is to illustrate a forced logical progression in a caricatured way, even considering that, anyone would notice the problematic element concerning occupational choice where becoming blind leads to playing the shamisen–and one more point.

Hunting cats to make shamisens?

For a moment, you might struggle to grasp the meaning–in fact, I believe shamisens are no longer made that way now. I can't say for sure if they ever really were (I want to think it's an urban legend–is this normalcy bias too?), but well, there was a time when cat skin was used for making shamisens.

Was it like using whale baleen for violin bows or elephant tusks for seals, or was it more commonplace?–It's almost unthinkable now. Knowing such details makes it a Japanese proverb harder to use casually like 'gold coins for a cat', 'casting pearls before swine' or 'if a dog walks they will hit a stick'–though 'if a dog walks they will hit a stick' also sounds like animal abuse, doesn't it?

Even towards the proverb 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do,' reactions like 'Huh, sounds bossy' are conceivable; it's a difficult world for tradition–but let's consider that over the long term, continuously or traditionally.

Right now, the truth of the urgent murder case that needs the fastest resolution–was cat skin.

If you can make a shamisen, you can surely make clothes too.

That was the deduction reached by the fashion leader among detectives, and speculative cat allergy sufferer, Kyoko Okitegami–there's no need to train and manipulate a cat, nor rely on the low probability chance of a stray cat happening to use the cat door.

Neither a manipulation-type culprit nor a probabilistic crime–metaphorically speaking, all you need to do is secretly plant a 'hand-knitted sweater' in the chest of drawers. That would also maintain the sealed state, killing two birds with one stone.

Specialized sewing skills would be essential, but the planting itself would likely be easier compared to installing a cat door–it's like subtly planting poison among the food in the refrigerator.

The information about not seeing stray cats near the scene might also take on a different meaning now.

Did they make one? A shamisen.

Or perhaps–pajamas to attack someone in their sleep.

"If it was like sleeping wrapped in a cat instead of pajamas, the symptoms must have been correspondingly severe–however, while one might avoid a cat right in front of them, in the case of a cat allergy, it's quite unexpected that the material of one's own clothes could be the cause. For the person himself, it must have been a symptom with a completely incomprehensible, unknown cause–no matter how much he coughed, he might have just judged it as feeling unwell. Never imagining that simply taking off the clothes might have saved him–though whether there was intent to actually take his life is uncertain."

An accident.

Or perhaps the possibility remains of criminal negligence with no strings attached–unlike a shamisen.

"If the cat door was a retrofitted cover-up, it certainly suggests confusion on the perpetrator's part regarding the unexpected outcome. Does that lead to the conclusion that the culprit is narrowed down to someone who knew the victim had a cat allergy, could freely enter and leave the house, and possessed specialized sewing skills?"

"Well, such custom-made pajamas probably couldn't be outsourced–if an investigation team is formed, I'd recommend first examining the pajamas worn at the time of death. Personally, I hope it's something like fur material made from the shed hair of long-haired cats."

It's regrettable that the suspicious death is confirmed as a murder case, and the truth that not only the victim but potentially many cats were sacrificed is also regrettable, but that profiling deviates significantly from my own persona–for the cat-loving detective, it was also painful that

this case didn't pique her intellectual curiosity, but rather felt like curiosity killed the cat, yet it seems Ms. Kyoko has once again cleared my false accusation.

A false accusation.

For me, that's less like nightwear and more like my everyday outfit. Still, thinking of myself as someone stuck wearing the same old thing... come to think of it, despite it being my own situation, I'd never considered what sort of fabric this 'costume' is actually made of.

Kyoko Okitegami's Cat Allergy–Forgotten

掟上今日子のSTAY HOLMES

Kyoko Okitegami’s STAY HOLMES

April 2nd, 2020, I, Yakusuke Kakushidate, was at a certain murder scene with the Forgetful Detective, Kyoko Okitegami. Of course, this was so Ms. Kyoko could clear the baseless suspicions directed at me—the False Accusations King... scratch that, someone prone to being falsely accused. As expected of the fastest detective who "solves any case in a day," the quite surprising real culprit had already been identified, but nonetheless, some mysteries still remained.

"Ms. Kyoko. Why do you think the killer so rudely left the door to the scene wide open? It has an auto-lock; they could have easily made it a locked-room murder just by closing it..."

"Precisely because it could have been a locked room."

Ms. Kyoko replied casually. Then, with her left hand, she pushed up the long sleeve of her cardigan—on her right forearm, written with a thick marker, was this:

‘× Confined Spaces’

"They must have wanted to avoid it. Confined spaces."

"...Then what about the reason for using a spear as the weapon? And an incredibly long one at that, fully two meters!"

"Social distancing."

As she said this, Ms. Kyoko elegantly lifted the hem of her tight long skirt—revealing this on her left shin:

‘× Close Contact’

"T-Then, what was the reason for committing the crime alone, using such an unfamiliar weapon? Given the killer's popularity, surely they could have recruited any number of accomplices—"

The master detective spoke no more, silently lifting the hem of her blouse. The characters written on her slender torso were, indeed, the ones you would expect.

‘× Crowded Places’

"Refraining from the classic solution chapter where all are gathered in one hall is a bit sad for a detective, but—well, if even a murderer avoids confined spaces, close contact, and crowds, we certainly can't forget about them, can we?"

Winking from behind her glasses, Ms. Kyoko lightly turned on her heel and began to leave the murder scene—I almost rushed to follow right behind her, but just barely managed to maintain social distance, and asked, "Um... Ms. Kyoko, what are you going to do now?" I was simply reluctant for the mystery-solving to be over and asked on impulse, but in truth, I couldn't help but be curious.

Ms. Kyoko only has today.

If that's the case, how on earth will she live through the coming days and months of this ever-changing 2020?

"Isn't it obvious?"

Without breaking stride as she walked away, turning back just slightly, the white-haired detective answered nonchalantly—as she boldly rolled up her left sleeve one last time.

"STAY HOLMES. I'll be reading mystery novels at home."

Afterword

Compared to the times when they said 'a human life lasts fifty years,' this era of the hundred-year lifespan is like living life twice, so perhaps it's akin to having two lives. While history tells of rulers seeking immortality, even if we're not talking about true immortality, everyone wants to live a long life—however, this is strictly a matter of averages, and the fact that human lifespans have increased is an entirely separate matter from whether you personally will live a long life, let alone a long and healthy one. If we knew our own lifespan in advance, I feel it might make planning our lives and schedules easier. It's not quite informed consent, but if we were notified right from birth, 'You have X more decades (perhaps a hundred years?) of life left,' wouldn't humanity be able to live more rationally?—though I pose this question, I also have a strong conviction that it probably wouldn't turn out that way. For one thing, I have a sense that 'living rationally' isn't clearly understood, and while it's probably synonymous with 'living healthily,' even more than life being finite, it's precisely because we don't know when we might suddenly drop dead that humanity has undergone an irrational evolution, disconnected from 'quality of life,' and perhaps this era of the hundred-year lifespan is the result. While the importance of physical and mental health is a given, it seems there would also be quite a lot to lose if health were forced upon us. If the difference between absolute health and relative health were like the difference between the fifty-year life and the hundred-year life... well, perhaps we're not just splitting hairs, we're splitting eras—fifty years versus a hundred, you see.

Anyway, this is the Forgetful Detective series. I'm ashamed to say I've already forgotten which volume this is in the series, but I'm delighted to be able to deliver this new installment. Since Ms. Kyoko is essentially reborn every day, you could say she's repeating multiple (or countless) lives, and from that viewpoint, she is extremely ephemeral. Exploring what is, in a sense, the most human aspect of a master detective often seen as superhuman was, surprisingly, a challenge I hadn't tackled before. You could say that living long is worthwhile, or perhaps that even a long life isn't enough—and in that vein, this has been Yakusuke Kakushidate's collection of false accusations, The Insurance Card of Kyoko Okitegami.

For this book's cover, I received an illustration depicting an ennui-filled Ms. Kyoko passing time in a waiting room. Mr. VOFAN, thank you very much. The Kyoko Okitegami's STAY HOLMES included at the end of this volume is a short short story I had the opportunity to write in 2020 for the "Day to Day" project. Now, five years having passed since then, I include it here anew as a memorandum.

Nisio Isin

*TL Note: I'm not sure how we can place this volume within Kyoko's timeline, to be honest. Not even the afterword acknowledges the White arc, which I suppose is fine (if unexpected) if he wants to do more classic Kyoko, but then the first case mentions her being shot? How do both of them go back to their normal life after v13...? (and the first case also references v14, of course)